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BY

HARVEY FERGUSSON



THE BLOOD OF
THE CONQUERORS
WOMEN AND WIVES

CAPITOL HILL

HOT SATURDAY

HOT
SATUR.
DAY

BY
HARVEY FERGUSON



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HOT
SATURDAY

CHAPTER ONE



THE family car was hers for the morning.

She drove first to the town's only Beauty Parlour, where she sat regal and impatient while one woman shampooed and waved her hair and another trimmed and polished her fingernails. When the job was done she sat up and looked at herself, long and intently, from all angles, Miss Shane agile behind her with a hand-glass.

Miss Shane, whose reflection stood beside hers in the mirror, was a terrifying advertisement of her own arts at their worst. Her blondined hair was permanently waved into a semblance of moulded brass, her eyebrows were pulled into fine black lines, her face looked enamelled white and pink, her nails were long, pointed and stained bright red, like

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talons daintily dipped in gore. . . . She certainly would ruin you if you let her, Ruth reflected. You had to know just when to stop her. . . .

"You look lovely, dearie," Miss Shane purred.

She said that to every customer, but she might have meant it this time, Ruth thought. Hungrily she stared at her own bright young image, drawing from it courage for her great effort.

Her hair was fine, abundant, light red and bobbed. Washed and fluffed it shone in a beam of sunlight, seeming live as flame. Her skin had the same bright freshness save for a spatter of freckles across her nose, and her eyes were bright blue. A shining vividness, suggesting intense, undaunted life, she had at her best. And she was at her best this morning. The fact filled her with a warmth of hope and confidence.

An anxious line between her brows she didn't like and she tried to relax it and widen her eyes. She knew just the note she wanted—

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sweet, pure and innocent like Mary Pickford. Movies and magazines gave her abundant standards of dress and manner. She knew always just how she wanted to look and this morning she came somewhere near realizing her vision.

She glanced down at her nails. Polished and perfect, with new-moon tips, but no pink on them because it fought with her hair. . . .

"Two seventy-five." She fished futilely in her bag, among vanity cases, lip-sticks, handkerchiefs, door keys and small change. She was mildly embarrassed.

"I haven't got it with me, Miss Shane. Will you trust me till Monday?"

"Sure I will, dearie. I know your dad gives you whatever you want."

Miss Shane always got in something like that—didn't know her place. But you had to keep your credit good here if nowhere else. . . .

She bared her teeth.

"Thank you so much, Miss Shane!" Her

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voice was a gentle coo. She was always polite except when she lost her temper.

"Don't mention it, dearie. . . . Good-bye . . . and good luck!"

Ruth shot her a quick look, anger just below the surface. What did she mean by good luck? The woman seemed to know everything. . . . Well, who wouldn't, running a beauty parlour? And a warmth of real friendliness shone in Miss Shane's eyes. Her irritation died.

"Thank you, Miss Shane."

She was out on the street again, starting the car, glancing at her wrist-watch. Quarter of eleven. Time for a little ride before lunch.

She always went for a ride alone, if she could get the car, when life seemed impossible, and when, as now, she wanted to think and plan. Riding alone seemed to stimulate her mind and release it. She could never think at home.

She picked her way deftly through the business section, throwing a bright smile at the town's only traffic cop by way of insurance.

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Out on the state road she settled low in her seat and stepped on the gas with a sigh of relief. Wind rippled round the windshield and tickled her neck like delicate fingers. The car sent through her body a vaguely voluptuous tremor and the engine sang to her sweetly.

Now what she wanted to do was to think—to plan that day shrewdly, completely. And instead of plans she got only bright visions of triumph. This thing she longed for daringly, hoping against a hundred perils, her imagination insisted on treating as a thing achieved. It leapt across difficulties and preliminaries to the heart of her desire. Briefly she hummed the wedding march and saw herself in a billow of lace and tulle and orange blossom, marching to victory. . . . Then . . . New York. . . . That was where they would live, she knew, and that was the home of her dream. She had never been there, never been East. In her mind it was vague and glorious as a believer's conception of heaven. It was all the elements of her ideal of beauty piled together in shining abundance. It was

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everything she lacked and longed for—money, light, speed, clothes, people—innumerable, astonishing people she had never met before, moving gracefully through an intricate endless round of pleasure. It was acres and mountains of shops in which to roam and buy. . . . Above all, it was music. Whenever she thought of New York she thought of music and especially of opera. Music was the art to which she thrilled—the thing that discovered the rhythms of life to her and lifted her out of its agonies. She was always music-hungry. And music to her meant jazz and opera.

Jazz filled her with the devil, made her want to kick high and show the world what pretty legs she had. Jazz was the music of abandon. But opera appealed to what her mother called her better nature. It made her feel sad and glorious. All the operatic airs that she could get she had played over and over on the phonograph until she knew them by heart—the prison song from *El Trovatore*, the love duet from *Tristan and Isolde*, the

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sextet from *Lucia*. They always stirred in her a great warm upwelling lump of longing for she didn't know what. They seemed to pour all through her, like water in a sponge, changing the very texture of being. They were rich voices full of tears and passion calling to her from some home of her soul which she might never find. When she was low and lonely they sometimes made her weep and when her energy was high they drove her to lift up her own powerful but inflexible contralto to the consternation of the neighbours. . . . A few years before, they had sometimes inspired a vision of herself standing in a glare of light before a multitude, moving it with her voice to crashing applause.

The dream of being a singer had faded but the dream of hearing great singers in the flesh was bright in her imagination now. And she was still the centre of the picture, seated in a box at the Metropolitan, wearing a green gown that held the bare beauty of her back and shoulders as the calyx holds a tea-rose bud. A rope of pearls hung to the cleft

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in her bosom and her hair was a red-golden radiance constrained by a simple fillet set with diamonds. . . . Darkness swallowed her. . . . Music poured up and through her. . . . A man sat at her elbow—a tall, powerful, rather sinister-looking man with shiny black hair and heavy black eyebrows. At every pause in the music he whispered to her, his voice hoarse and urgent. She could feel his breath on her bare back. She smiled, a little disdainfully. . . .

A strip of red carpet laid across a sidewalk under an awning—that was an item in her every vision of the opulent elegance for which she yearned. Over a strip of red carpet under an awning one walked to glory. . . .

Through crowded metropolitan streets, where coloured lights leapt and shimmered, she drove in a custom-built limousine with a man in plum-coloured livery on the driver's seat. She could see herself in the lighted coach, wearing a turquoise-blue evening wrap with a great white feather collar. A single white carnation nodded from a cut-glass

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holder and an orchid peeped from the folds of her cloak. . . . Across the red carpet came a liveried man to open the door of her car. Graceful and exquisite, she descended—entered a great ball-room, lit by chandeliers and filled with men and women in evening dress, who turned to look—people who knew nothing about her except how beautiful she was. . . . A world of new people, strange people. . . . A world of handsome eager men with money. . . .

Palm Beach in winter—all rich people went there. . . . She wore a tunic bathing-suit of blue silk, simple, and very slight. Her arms and legs were tanned a uniform yellow-brown. Behind her was a vague white row of sumptuous bungalows, sitting among tropical shrubbery, palm-trees. Before her the blue ocean endlessly rose and salaamed in white-topped breakers, spreading a lace of foam at her feet. . . .

The speedometer caught her eye, brought her suddenly back to here and now. Forty-five miles an hour, it warned. Without re-

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alizing it, she had been going faster and faster, as though her dream had been a visible thing she chased.

She slowed down, feeling foolish and irritated. What an idiot she was to kid herself that way! Her imagination was always running away with her. She wanted to think about difficulties, not dream about success. . . . Even if she could manage him, there was his family. . . . Good thing his mother had died.

Mothers of men were her natural enemies. They almost never liked her.

A father would be easier. But the worst danger was right here at home—what people would tell him about her. He was such an innocent, he would believe anything and he would be awfully easy to shock. . . . Darling, when you are all mine, you will know. . . . No, you couldn't talk that way to that kind of a man. . . . Oh, if he only wasn't such a boob!

And was he really as interested as she thought? What was she building all these hopes upon? She had seen him only twice

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and never alone except in the car on the street. It was just the way he had looked at her. That was not much, and yet—never had she felt so sure of anyone. . . . Funny how you could nearly always tell the first time a man looked at you. . . .

The eyes of men were her study. She knew the sly inquiring look of wise woman-seeking men, and even better the look of men who are afraid—the look with hatred under it. And she knew the look of the man who has fallen wholly in love—the wide-eyed worshipful baby look of pure illusion, of dream and desire.

It had shone in his eyes that first evening on the front porch when he brought the letter of introduction to her mother. She had prepared for his coming and she knew she was looking her best, all in white with a white silk scarf about her shoulders. It was dusk enough so that her freckles didn't show.

She didn't say much. For one thing, she was too surprised. He was too entirely different from what she had expected. A youth of

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metropolitan elegance, sophisticated, perhaps a little supercilious, she had imagined him. And for no good reason she had thought of him as tall and dark, with heavy black eyebrows—a rather devilish-looking fellow. She had been prepared to find him a little stuck-up and to convince him that small-town people were not always as slow as he thought. . . .

She had *not* been prepared to meet a great gawky boy, blushing and perspiring with embarrassment, encumbered by his own hands and feet. She knew he was a year older than herself, because Mrs. Calder had written that he had just come into that half million when he was twenty-one, but he seemed younger because he was so shy and had such a childish-looking mouth.

She didn't know what to say, so she let her mother do the difficult talking and just smiled at him when he looked her way. And he looked her way most of the time after the first few minutes. She seemed to have filled him with a bedazzled amazement, as though he had never seen a girl before. When he left

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he almost fell off the porch saying good-bye. . . . Her disappointment had given way to a glowing sense of power.

Then he came to Sunday dinner, and that was awful. She remembered it with pain. It was hot as sin and she felt her nose getting shiny and her neck getting red. Heat was just what her looks wouldn't stand. She always looked too hot anyway, with her red hair and high colour, and she perspired so easily, even on the backs of her hands. She sat there feeling drops of water running down her back, smiling with her teeth when she would have liked to curse and weep. Dad looked like a hick with his purple necktie and told moth-eaten jokes about two travelling men. Annie, the little pest, kept piping up with something about a stomach-ache and finally had to be sent from the table. The chicken was dry because he had been twenty minutes late, and the California strawberries were tasteless and the whipped cream simply lay down and perished in its dish. Juliana, the Mexican maid, had to be coached and scolded. . . . And he must

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have been used to butlers and wonderful food and everything spiffy. He certainly didn't act like a man that had ever been anywhere, but with half a million dollars back of him he must have been used to a good deal of swank. . . . There was no doubt about the money, though. Everybody knew the shoe-polish Faddens had it, and he was an only child. They did say the old man had worked up from the bottom, so maybe they were not very tony, after all. . . .

Anyway he didn't seem to notice anything except her. He sat and stared at her most of the time, just as he had at first. He didn't eat much, but who could have? And he hardly talked at all. He seemed a perfect dumb-bell. And yet they said he was a shark in something or other—industrial chemistry, she thought. He did try to explain something about alkaloids, and that killed off what little conversation there was, because of course nobody else knew anything about them, and he looked as though he would like to slide under the table and die of embarrassment.

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It was awful, but he came through it with that same worshipping look in his eyes. And if he could stand that dinner and the family he could stand a lot.

Afterward they went for a drive and that was better. He perked up and talked a little, and he saw the town and seemed interested. Incidentally the town saw him—with her. Everybody went driving on Sunday afternoon. She had felt proud and elated at the time, but now she wished not so many people knew about him. . . . Well, there was no help for that. They would have to find out sooner or later.

. . . The main idea was to show him a good time to-day. He was supposed to like outdoor life, and outdoors was where she shone. She was strong and graceful and wasn't afraid of snakes and didn't have to be dragged around. . . . Show him a good time and if possible get him alone. . . . That was why she hadn't invited anyone but Alma and Doc Jagers. Mother would hold down Annie and the Doc's lung wouldn't let him go far

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and Alma would probably stay with the Doc. . . .

She glanced at her wrist-watch. Quarter of twelve. And she had forgotten to order stuffed olives and she had to go by the Bud-longs' and tell Alma what time they were going to start. She slowed down, went into low and turned.

At the top of Hairpin Hill she stopped a moment, partly to let the engine cool and partly because she always stopped here when she was alone.

The spot was marked scenic on the Chamber of Commerce road maps. On her retina it was a vague, familiar blur of blue and purple mountain, yellowish plain, green valley stitched with silver river. She was not much aware of it as a view, but she liked the sense of lift and isolation the place gave her, and the cooling wind that always blew there. It brought her a moment of peace and self-sufficiency.

She could remember when this place had been a long day's journey from town over

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sandy roads in a buck-board. Life was slow in those days before they had cars, and it never got far from home. A hundred miles were no more to her than ten had been to her parents when she was born. Where they had crawled she flew. But she flew nowhere, she merely circled. She came back no less surely to this place that owned her life. . . .

For a few minutes her thought hung suspended, as she was, far above the world she lived in. She was aware only of colour, sunlight and the pleasant relaxation of her healthy young body as she stretched her legs and arms. Then the town reached up and touched her—called her back. Stuffed olives. Alma Budlong. Twelve o'clock. She started the car resolutely, her brows drawing down to a point of concentration and purpose.

With easy confidence she zigzagged down the hill, ignoring signs. "Slow down," they warned. "Sound your horn." She knew every inch of the way and she was wholly without physical fear. Every year a few tourists broke their necks here—burned out brake

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bands and went over the edge at one of the sharp turns. Some people were awful fools. Nothing like that would ever happen to her. That was her feeling about all the physical perils of life. Terrible things happened, but not to her.

Much of the road was blasted out of solid rock and every smooth face of it offered her admonition and information. "Stop at the Interocean Garage." "Jesus died to save you." "The Jewett makes this hill in high." "Battery Bill's for battery ills."

Down a long slope she sped toward the valley, making a frightened jack rabbit and flying birds look slow. She was in a hurry now.

Ahead of her a plume of pale grey dust hid a car. She chased it and caught it. Through the dust loomed the rear of an ancient Ford with tremulous fenders and a load that bulged wide on either hand with box and bundle and chicken coop. It was one of those jitneys that passed in an endless procession all summer carrying whole families and

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their belongings, bound for California. They camped at night and seemed to live on nothing. The town hated them because they brought no money and sometimes stole gas and tires and went broke and had to be taken care of. . . . And why did they want to go to California anyway? "They think they're gonna find a money-tree out there," old man Gaynes at the Interocean said, and he was about right.

Meantime, they cluttered up the road horribly. This one was not making more than fifteen miles an hour and he was awfully hard to pass. Leaning forward in urgent irritation, she squawked her horn long and hard. The jitney held the middle of the road. Dust poured into her face. Her hair, freshly and expensively washed, was getting full of it. She pushed within an inch of the car, rage rising red into her cheeks, hand hard on the horn.

Damn the man! He heard her all right. He was just pigheaded like most of these bums.

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At a turn she plunged alongside recklessly, still honking, forced the complaining jitney off the road. As she roared by she turned and glared her indignation and contempt. A woman was driving, shakily, with a child in her lap. She wore a blue calico dress and a huge sunbonnet with stringy blond hair leaking out from under it. Her face was young but lean and hollow-cheeked, sunburned. Pale blue eyes, full of impotent envious rage, looked into Ruth's for an instant and were gone.

Something about the eyes made them stick in her mind. For a moment her sympathy ran back to the woman. Bumping along the road in that rattletrap with a baby in her lap. No man in sight—sick, maybe. Lots of them were lungers. Pity! If anything happened she'd be stuck. . . . Oh, somebody would help her out. Some of them got clear across the continent on lifts. They told about a man that made it in a car without an engine, just waiting for pulls. And another did it by begging gas. He was always just out. You

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had to be careful. People were such liars.

She hit the paved road in the valley and speeded up with relief. The town ran to meet her with signs stuck on trees and fences, painted on barns. Garages, hotels, restaurants, camp grounds, stores all clamoured for the incoming dollars. A stranger could have compiled a fair business directory of the town before he got within ten miles of it. The biggest sign of all was the one put up by the Chamber of Commerce, saying "Welcome" on one side and "Good-bye, God bless you" on the other. Beneath this on both sides was the boast and prophecy—fifty thousand people by 1928.

They would never make it, she knew. That line was Barney Gobel's idea. He claimed they had thirty thousand now, but the census only gave them twenty. The rest, he said, was outside the city limits.

The place was growing though. She felt pride in the fact that she could remember when there wasn't a house out here. What had been old man Greenleaf's cow-pasture

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five years ago was Cottonwood Grove Edition now, laid off in streets with tiny trees planted and fragile wooden houses springing up like mushrooms after rain. You could buy a lot there for ten dollars down and a dollar a week for life, or something like that. Otto Schenk would make a fortune out of it, they said. And his father was a bar-tender in the old days, and bought the Greenleaf ranch for next to nothing. Old man Greenleaf once owned half the land the town now stood on, and he died without a nickel. Nearly all the old-timers got left. . . .

A horn sounded behind her and a car hummed by, with the sweet even voice of effortless speed. It was a huge limousine with balloon tires and a liveried man on the driver's seat. She glimpsed men and women smartly dressed, motor caps and veils—swell people from the East on their way to the coast in their own car. She could see the New York licence plate. Suddenly she felt small, inferior and resentful bumping along in the old Buick. She glared at the rear of

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the passing car, stepped on the gas and tried to catch it. No use. It was too fast for her. It looked like a foreign make and was doing better than fifty without seeming to try.

. . . Have a car like that maybe. She pictured herself rolling into town in it, dressed in a grey English homespun travelling-suit, grey suède shoes and a fine abundant grey veil a floating cloud about her head. They would stay just a few days, give a tea and invite everybody. Then on to the coast, three hundred miles a day, stopping every night at big resort hotels, full of smart people and music. . . . San Francisco, Los Angeles, Yosemite, Santa Catalina, Tia Juana. The words sang a comforting melody in her mind.

She turned down Seventh Street, grateful for the shade of old far-reaching cottonwoods that filled the air with their gossamer-winged seed and piled them in filmy drifts along the curb. This was the oldest and most respectable residence street in the town. Here the aristocracy of business men and lawyers who came in with the railroad had built their

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houses almost half a century before. It had acquired a mellowness of deep shade, well-established lawns, old brick walls banked with ivy and porches ambushed behind clematis and honeysuckle.

The Budlong place was one of the oldest and made no shift to hide the fact. It was a tall square frame, unmistakably of the eighties, with dormer windows thrusting through an old slate roof, and a wide pillared porch, shedding in flakes the last of many coats of blue paint. Its sagging corner and failing picket fence, its ancient woody lilac-bushes and dying apple-trees told the world that something in this town had been dignified and respectable long enough to get rotten.

Dimly through a screen of vine she could see old Judge Budlong on the porch in a rocker with a newspaper in his lap. He looked to be asleep, she thought, as she crossed the yard, but her foot on the step brought forth a deep rich boom of welcome.

"Howdeedoo, Miss Ruth . . . Alma ought

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to be here any time now. Sit down, my girl!"

"Don't get up, Judge, and don't let me disturb you. I'll just look at this paper."

"You look mighty charming to-day, Miss Ruth. You're a good sight for old eyes."

"Thank you, Judge."

She gave him a shining smile. His eyes, brightening, travelled her eagerly from ankle up.

The old devil! But they said he was a terror in the early days when he was young and the town was wide open. It was hard to imagine, looking at him now, and especially hard for her because she could not remember him except as an old man.

He had closed his eyes again. He looked weary—yellow and shrivelled—good as dead, everything but his voice. He could still boom.

That voice had boomed at intervals in her life as long as she could remember. On Fourths of July it had boomed about the con-

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stitution and the fall of Rome and the founding fathers. At commencement exercises it had boomed about glorious futures and the promise of youth and all these happy young faces. At packed mass meetings in the armoury it had boomed about pure womanhood and the menace to our homes. When William Jennings Bryan came to town it boomed eloquent introduction. It had boomed through every political campaign, always drawing crowds but seldom votes. The old Judge had been a candidate for almost everything, but he hardly ever got elected. He didn't have a dollar now, they said. Alma kept him going on her salary as librarian. It was lucky for him she hadn't married. . . .

His hands caught and held her eyes. Dangling, yellow, all vein and tendon, they were like dead limbs on a dying tree, those hands that once had clutched at love and power. She looked at her own hands and bare arms, round and luscious as ripe fruit, with a faint sprinkling of golden-silky hairs. Like a cold

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draught in the dark it struck her that her flesh must fade and shrivel too, must lose its power and beauty. . . . O God, it wouldn't be so bad if only anything would ever happen. . . . She would make things happen! . . . Whatever she did, she wouldn't sit and dry up like Alma. . . .

She heard Alma come in the back way and went to meet her, quietly, so as not to disturb the Judge. Arms about each other, they went out to the back yard, where a hammock swung and an old porch rocker stood under a catalpa-tree.

"I just came to tell you we're going to start about four this afternoon," Ruth said. "We're going to drive to the end of the Canyon road and have lunch there and maybe climb to the top if everybody isn't too lazy. Then I thought maybe we could stop on the way back at Willow Springs and dance awhile. . . ."

"You want to do too much, child. You'll be dead tired."

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"I'm never tired. You know that, Alma. Please don't go back on me to-day. I haven't danced in a coon's age."

"All right, dear. I'm awfully weary now, but I'll have time for a nap before that. Who's going?"

"Just you and Doc Jagers and mother and Annie and that Mr. Fadden I told you about. I wanted to get up more of a bunch but I just couldn't. Men are so scarce in this town and there's no use making a hen party out of it."

Alma brought her eyes down from the sky to look at Ruth quizzically.

"Why didn't you invite John Romer? You and he seemed awfully interested in each other."

Ruth lifted a hand and made a mouth.

"The family is thumbs down on him. You might know that."

"Yes, I suppose so. Well, what's the new one like—that Mr. Fadden? I think you might have brought him around to tea or something."

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"I haven't had a chance. He's not at all like what you would expect."

Alma laughed, patronizingly, as thirty-three is apt to laugh at twenty.

"Nobody ever is," she observed.

"No—o. . . . But the Faddens have such a lot of money and he's lived in New York and went to Yale and everything. You'd expect something pretty classy. But he's just a big shy awkward kid. He's a year older than I am but he seems about fourteen. Of course, he's supposed to be sick, but he doesn't look it."

"What's the matter with him?"

"Well, his mother died last spring, so Mrs. Calder wrote, and he took it awfully hard and had flu and was threatened with pneumonia. They were afraid of T.B., I suppose. Anyway, they sent him out here to get well. He needs a high altitude, Mrs. Calder wrote. . . . He needs something, that's certain!" she added in a burst of irritation that surprised herself. "I never saw such a stick!"

Alma laughed again.

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"Maybe you'll like him better when you get to know him. . . . Men are a terrible disappointment to you, aren't they, dear?"

"Well . . . haven't they been to you?"

"I guess they have," Alma conceded with a sigh. She lay looking up at nothing, her face wistful. Ruth wished she hadn't said that—especially the "haven't." She suddenly felt awfully sorry for Alma—the pity of youth full-blown for youth beginning to wane. Alma could still make herself look young sometimes at night, but lying tired in daylight she seemed almost middle-aged. Her figure was still good and she had pretty ankles, but her neck was beginning to wrinkle and she had a few grey hairs—and then her glasses. . . . Funny what a handicap glasses were to a woman. Men never liked them and they must be always falling off at getting in the way at critical moments. . . . That was another trouble with working. You wore glasses and looked tired. Alma began to look old just about the time she went to work at the library.

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That was just after her affair with Rupert Elwood. The old Judge broke it up, they said. No daughter of his could marry a fiddler. That was just like him. Alma was a fool not to run off with Rupert if she had the chance. And she must have had the chance. . . .

The one o'clock whistle sounded long and high and left the town deep in summer noon-time heat and quiet. The machinery of the place was stopping for the week-end. Men were going home to lunch and dinner, tired children were taking naps and women after a morning of bustle were subsiding into hammocks and rocking-chairs. The moment belonged to little near-by sounds and faint far-away ones—to the chirp and bicker of sparrows in the street, the hum of a sewing-machine in the house next door, a distant phonograph playing *Red-hot Mamma*.

Alma lay in the hammock with her eyes closed and Ruth sat looking at her, wondering. It had just struck her, and with a curious poignance of interest, that Alma had

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never said a thing about her affair with Rupert. Ruth knew all about it in the same way she knew all about everybody and everything in the town—by word of gossip, for which she had a ready ear. She knew so many things about it they couldn't all be true. But everyone agreed that Rupert and Alma had been crazy about each other and everyone had expected them to get married. And then he had gone away suddenly without her and never come back. They all said the Judge was to blame—that he showed Rupert the door. Well, Alma could have used the same door. . . . You didn't lose out if you had any gumption! You didn't have to dry up like an unpicked apple on a tree! Poor old Alma! She had muffed her chance, that was all. . . .

She rose and touched Alma's hand, tenderly, in farewell.

"I've got to run, dear. See you at four. And don't bother about any lunch. Mother and I'll fix it. . . ."

Her way home took her past the park. As

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she approached it she saw a man sitting on a bench, smoking a pipe. She looked at him hard. . . . Yes, Romer. . . . She hadn't thought of him all morning. With a frown of irritation she put on the brakes just in time to make a quick right-hand turn, and went around a block. . . .

CHAPTER TWO



ROMER came out upon the long veranda of the sanitarium and sat down suddenly in a rocking-chair. He had just been pronounced a cure and his knees were weak with joy.

He had been up and about the town most of the summer and had regained a large part of his strength but he had done that several times before only to be struck down again by hæmorrhage. So he had forced himself to regard these good days in the sun as a brief reprieve . . . The deadly bugs were still in his lungs. They were only resting. Presently, he had believed, they would attack him again and choke him with his own blood. Soon or late they would drive his life out through his throat, killing their host in a fury of overreaching greed.

Now he had been assured that the bugs were

beaten. Three months more he must loaf in the town, swallow raw eggs, bathe in the river and lie in the sun. Then he could go anywhere and do anything he chose. After being long a dead man in effect he was restored to life.

He got up and started down the street, feeling a sudden need of action, not knowing just where he was bound or why.

"I'm going to live . . . I'm going to live. . . ." It ran through his mind like a chant to the swing of his walking. . . .

Suddenly he stopped and laughed out loud to the amazement of a passing delivery boy who doubtless rated him crazy.

He had just remembered that once he had decided—once and for all—life is futile and a man is better out of it. . . . That was at Harvard. . . . Recollections of those days came rushing into his mind, strangely vivid and strangely remote. . . . In biology class he listened with gloomy assent to lectures which proved to him that he was made of unstable compounds and would presently decompose

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into his elements, and that conclusion had seemed to seal his doom! To forget it he went to parties where he drank cocktails and necked pretty girls, sadly disturbing the equilibrium of his unstable compounds. . . . Then, as though to fulfil his prescience of disaster, war came and carried him to a training-camp in the South. He tried all day to make himself into a good man-killing machine, ripping up a straw dummy with a bayonet, and on nights of leave he wandered sadly in the dark, until he met Ella.

She served coffee in a canteen and had a soft red mouth and round urgent breasts pushing against her blouse. It became the one great desire of his life to possess Ella before he died. For he was sure he was going to die and he made Ella share his conviction. She accepted coolly his hand and his insurance papers and they were married a week before he sailed—a week of sprawling naked honeymoon in a New York hotel. Then he went to the transport and Ella's face—foolish, tear-stained, bewildered by an emotion she had

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not bargained for—faded slowly out of his mind.

Ingloriously he fell to influenza germs instead of bullets. He lived through high fevers in crowded hospitals. When he emerged he was no longer a man but a T.B. For a long time he had been a wandering invalid. Periods of apparent recuperation were followed by hæmorrhage and long inertia when he seemed but a corpse aware of itself, when a lifted arm might have killed him and he grew a beard because they dared not touch his throat with a razor. He marvelled how his whiskers flourished when everything else about him seemed moribund. They grew out of him as grass would grow soon for the doctors had sentenced him to death.

But the hæmorrhage that was to kill him never came. In this town of last resort he had unexpectedly mended through long days of unbroken sunshine.

He had come near dying several times but he had not wasted long. While men who

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seemed less sick went slowly on toward death, he sat up, he walked, he went outdoors—and now he was sound again.

He felt himself a new man in a new world. Yet nothing was changed except the way he felt. He had been all gloom and fear and now he was all joy and acceptance. He had groped in vain after something to live for, and now the mere fact of being alive seemed all that he could ask. It seemed to him that all who despaired of life and dreamed of ideal worlds should be sentenced as he had been to a spell of living death. Then they would know that sun, earth and the touch of his fellows are all man needs for his joy.

He was filled with an immense greed for living like the insatiable hunger he had known when first he began to mend. He did not care where he went or whom he met. He felt that he could find in any man or woman something that answered to his need, that he could look at anything and like it. He felt an unreasoned conviction that life would give him all he craved. . . .

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His route took him down Center Street, where a second-hand trolley car screamed and thundered on flat wheels, jitneys pattered back and forth and lined busy sidewalks, movies bid for patronage with gaudy-coloured prints of violent adventure and frantic love, too many stores battled for life under rag and paper banners that called to fire sales, inventory sales, moving sales, bankruptcy sales. Above the ruck of two-story frame and brick, the new bank building and the new hotel stood large and white, incongruous but promising, like first teeth in a baby's gums.

A few blocks farther and he was in the respectable quiet of the residence section, where many neat little houses and a few pretentious big ones sat on small square lawns, hopeful young shade trees patched the street with shadow, birds twittered and brightly dressed children played, shiny cars waited at the curb for women with silken legs and high heels, starting out to shop.

Beyond this lay a fringe of shack, hovel and dump, where lean dogs scouted for garbage,

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dirty children played in puddles, heavy-walking toil-blackened men came home at night with empty dinner pails to gravid women frying things on oil stoves: . . .

It was all familiar to him and yet this morning it was all new. He remembered well when he had seen it first with sick eyes through the windows of a hospital ambulance, and how dreary and ugly it had looked to him then. But for its far horizon of blue rockies it was like a dozen places he had known.

A dead town he had called it then, and what struck him about it now was its conquering vitality. When the railroad dropped a few men of a certain kind here, this kind of a town grew up as surely as a plant from seed. It had grown rank and fast. It was not fifty years old and it had already thirty thousand people. It was like a hardy weed that could grow anywhere and choke out any other growth.

It had choked out two other towns, he knew. The first was a sleepy little Mexican village

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of recumbent brown adobe in the shade of old trees—a helpless thing left behind by the waning power of Spain. Nothing remained of it now but a few old houses. The town had absorbed the Mexicans. Some it had made into fairly good politicians, lawyers, business men. Others it had pushed down into the shops, where they wore overalls, carried dinner pails, joined unions, were indistinguishable from the foreign-born. . . .

Before the rails were laid a frontier town of wasteful enterprise and violent revel had lived here briefly. Old men could still describe it to him. Dance-halls, saloons and gambling-joints flared red and yellow along a single street. Cowboys, buffalo-hunters, prospectors, played and fought, threw away life, money and energy. But the town needed that these things be used, not wasted. Pioneers did their job and gave way to money-makers in stiff collars and stiff respectabilities, cautious and over-disciplined as the pioneers had been wild and daring. Work and save

was their religion, because that was what the town needed of them. It had to have money to grow.

The town was a hungry brute, he thought, changing the figure to suit his need, and men were what it ate. It had a sure appetite and no mercy. It used what it could and spat out what it found indigestible. It would spit him out as soon as it had sucked all the cash out of him, for he would not marry or work here. He would make neither money nor men. . . .

He had walked as far as the park, where cottonwood-trees shaded patchy grass, idle men dozed on benches, nursemaids jounced crying babies in perambulators, small children scrapped and frolicked.

The park interrupted the smooth-running current of his thought, because this was where he had always met her and just about this time. Although he had resolved the day before that he wouldn't, he sat down and lit a pipe, feeling foolish and uneasy, knowing she probably wouldn't come and yet hoping she would. . . .

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They had never made an appointment, but this bench had served them as a place for meetings supposed to be quite accidental. He sat there and smoked and almost every day she came along on her way to or from town. She called hello, stopped, and they talked awhile, she watching furtively to see who passed. Then she invited him to ride and he got in beside her. She whisked him away like a dangerous prize, always watchful, alert as a wild animal, frightened, but not frightened out of her joy in escapade.

They always drove up the valley to a side-road and up that to a grove of cottonwood-trees about a ruined house—a forgotten place where hidden doves cooed and lizards ran and played over broken walls. She parked her car in the shade and turned her impish smile on him, her red hair wind-rumpled and her blue eyes bright with challenge and fun. She was all mischief and desire. She was at once a woman meeting a lover and a kid stealing jam.

For her parents would have disapproved

of him most strongly. Both of them understood that, without discussion. He had not the makings of a husband. He was a married man and a sick man. He had no money and no job. He was a stranger with strange ideas.

That was no small part of his charm for her. He was peril and adventure.

Just why she had gotten such a hold on *his* imagination was not equally clear to him. He had not been lonely in the town. A good many women had smiled on him, as women nearly always did wherever he went. But it was only her smile that he remembered. . . .

He remembered it now with chagrin. For she had simply gone off and left him sitting there. A week ago he had thought he was on the verge of conquest and now he had not seen her for a week, except once at a distance—and with another man.

He got up and walked on, kicking savagely at a pebble on the sidewalk. The pebble was himself and also it was she. What an idiot he was to keep on thinking about her and

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looking for her. . . . She was a stupid little wench, after all. Intelligence was a faculty she lacked. Cunning she had, and a kind of intuitive acuteness. He could not deny that she had understood pretty well what kind of man he was in relation to her. She had always shown herself to him as a sophisticated young person, wholly above the town and its ways. She had chosen her pose not without judgment and held it with some skill—enough so that he had been baffled of the reality behind it.

He never knew what she was thinking. And she never knew what he was talking about. Their conversation had been a failure. But their love-making was a stirring success. And they didn't seem to need many words. It was well enough understood between them that they owed each other no speeches or promises, that they met to play and parted without obligation. That was the good thing about it. They couldn't talk, but they could play. . . .

It was wholly within their unspoken agree-

ment for her to drop him whenever she pleased. His sense of justice came to her rescue. But his irritation against her remained. He couldn't forget how she had felt in his arms, round, smooth and strong, the taste of her mouth and the smell of her hair. . . .

His morning was ruined. That was clear. A little while before, he had been God surveying life from heights of serene detachment. Now he was only a jilted swain with a queer ache in his middle. He had looked at the town with complete impersonality, relishing it as spectacle. Now he felt merely outcast—like a man peering through a window at a party, knowing there was no seat for him. Nor could he see how anywhere he could sit down and bite the common bread of life.

For one thing he had resolved—that he would be nothing but himself, accept no discipline but his own. And if there was any place where he belonged he had yet to find it. He belonged here even less than in colleges or in armies.

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Always, he thought with melancholy pride, he must wander and look at things, living a bit of one life and a bit of another, savouring a thousand lives but never devouring one.

A part of him was content to do this, took pride in the sense of a special destiny. But another part of him longed for something warmer and more comforting—wanted to marry a plump, strong, ignorant girl with no nerves and no ideas, wanted to love her, quarrel with her, get babies out of her, build a little wooden house to keep them in, water a lawn and feed chickens in a back yard, fight with pigheaded men for money, get drunk and play poker on Saturday night, and go for a drive in a Ford on Sunday—be part of a place and a tribe and die perhaps leaving richer soil for something else to grow in.

He could savour such a life in imagination as well as any, and better than most, for it was the social soil from which he had sprung, and something of it would stick always to the roots of his being. Once he had thought he hated such a life, and needed above all to

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escape it. Now he could see that his hatred had been thwarted longing, like that of a spurned lover. Such a life now he could imagine with sympathy, but he could not live it because it could not use him.

Any more than she could use him. She had turned away from him inevitably because her destiny led elsewhere. . . .

He had reasoned himself out of his irritation, and walked himself out of the town without exactly knowing in either case where he was going. . . .

The irrigated valley lay all about him, flat and green between barren uplands. It was rank with the smell of mud in the sun and of things growing thick and crowded. Beside the road poplar-trees thrust sharply at a hot clean sky, heavy ripe alfalfa rippled a crest of purple bloom, watermelons sprawled and swelled in the mud among tall corn. Near by bees and locusts made small music and far away a mowing-machine sang the grass to sleep. In a thick cottonwood a turtle-dove

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yearned for love in a voice of low liquid melancholy not without hope.

Doves were the voice of the valley. One could hear them everywhere. It pleased him to think this soft sweet music, peaceful and sad, had sounded for a thousand years and would sound for a thousand more. It was like the steady pulse of life beating untroubled under the jerk and crash of its surface.

He went up the river to a secluded bend where the water rolled swift and yellow from side to side of a wide sandy flood plain. River and sand glistened blindingly back at the sun. A low dense growth of cottonwood and button-willow pushed down against the hurried water. The river chewed and growled at the forested bank, biting it back. But the forest threw winged seed across, and a sand-bar on the other side already supported a growth a foot high, strong to catch and hold the river when it turned. River and forest wrestled endlessly here, and no house or fence could stand. He had come to regard the

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place as his own because he had never met another human near it.

He stripped in a bit of shade and plunged, as was his daily habit. His skin was sun-browned from many such plunges, so that he looked not strange, but as though he belonged to the water. It looked and sounded dangerous, hurried and guttural, with down-sucking swirls, but he had learned long since that it was really kind, warm enough so that a man might have paddled in it all day, with a smooth sandy bottom and seldom more than neck-deep. Its current bore him along in a gentle and effortless ride. It showed him new and surprising sights. He swam on his back and was suddenly aware of the sky, not as blue vacancy, but as a many-storied world where gnats and midges lived just over his nose, butterflies and dragon-flies wandered and played a few feet higher, cliff swallows hunted invisible prey above the tree-tops, and up near a lone white cloud a buzzard sailed endless patient circles.

He dived and opened his eyes in the yellow,

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faintly translucent world where cool solemn catfish lived their unregarding lives. He swam on his side and looked into the stern astonished faces of bright green frogs with ivory bellies squatting in a row beneath the bank. He peered into the damp cavern where a beaver lived and disturbed a reluctant turtle off a log. For all these cool amphibians he felt an intimate sympathy. He too knew the comfort of living in two elements instead of one.

He crawled out of the water, feeling a new man, washed of woe and desire. He felt placid, innocent and limp, regarding all things with the eye of contemplative wonder, like Adam on the day of his creation. Seeking out a bit of dry hot sand, he lay down in the sun, letting it soak into him, wholly welcome for a while after the mild chill of the water. This was his daily therapeutic. Actinic rays, according to the doctor, poured new life into him, and he was willing now to believe it. He felt comfortable, permanent and unconcerned.

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From where he lay he could see nothing but river, sand, trees, pale yellow hills that bounded the valley, and a range of purple mountains looking over them. .

Here was a bit of the earth as it fell from the hand of God. Here was the peace of the earth before man came to disturb it.

Once he had thought he would like to seek out some such place to live—just sit there and think. Now, after a little while, it seemed only a beautiful emptiness. . . . He rose and began pulling on his trousers.

With them he put on all his preoccupations again. He found that a vision of red hair had dogged him to the river, and was leering at him now, making mock of his pretensions to self-sufficiency. . . . His trousers carried him back to the town. . . .

CHAPTER THREE



OLD Ham and Potato Salad.

Lettuce and Mayonnaise.

Bread and Butter.

Iced Tea.

That was what they always had for lunch on Saturday because it was the girl's day out and the delicatessen profited by her absence.

It was hotter inside the Bruck house than outdoors. That was the trouble with bungalows. They hoarded heat like fireless cookers. Yet they had largely replaced the cool, thick-walled adobe caverns of which the town had once been made. They were cheap and quickly built, and the magazines were full of fetching designs for them. They were fashionable and pretty and therefore easy to sell. They had many advantages but coolness was not among them.

The Brucks sat down to lunch in weary

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silence. It was too hot to talk and too hot to eat. In fact, it was too hot to live. One could only hope to survive until the sun went down. In this high altitude it was always cool at night. That was the boast of the town. The sun was hot in the middle of the day—no one could deny it. But you could sleep under blankets every night—or almost every night.

Mr. Bruck frowned at his lunch and with a fork picked at his salad as though he expected to find a worm in it. Heat always brought out the worst of his humours. He was too stout to stand it well.

He was coatless now, and large round areas of perspiration widened at each armpit. His collar, although protected from the red ardour of his thick neck by a silk handkerchief, was visibly collapsing, and this alone was enough to corrupt his temper.

Summer to him was largely a struggle to face the world in an erect and unblemished collar. During the worst of the hot spells he sometimes used six or seven collars a day.

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He kept a supply of them at his office and his laundry bills were enormous, but he paid them without flinching. He would almost as soon have appeared in public without his trousers as in a wilted collar. Nor did the soft shirts recently come into vogue afford him any relief. He had bought one and donned it in the privacy of his own bed-chamber but had never summoned the courage to go abroad in it. The exposure of his neck, after twenty years of concealment, seemed to him somehow indecent and he was especially sensitive about the deepening wrinkle in the back of it.

His humour now, as always, dominated the family group. When Dad frowned no one could make mirth and when his spirits were high he still had power to stir a gale of laughter that would carry them all along with him.

For he had been a famous joker in his time. Back in the horse-and-buggy days of the late nineties and early nineteen-hundreds he had been the life of every lively party in

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the town. He was the wild boy then, whom nearly everybody liked and everybody deplored. He did terrible things and got away with them. Before he was out of school he had made a scandalous reputation as leader of a gang that stole the refreshments at church sociables and played Hallow-e'en pranks, such as locking a bull into the courthouse. A few years later, he organized the strip-poker club which caused such a hullabaloo when the president of the W. C. T. U. looked in on it. He got dead drunk and went to bed on Judge Budlong's front lawn. He owned one of the first bicycles the town saw and was several times arrested for scorching down Center Street.

All of this and much more he was forgiven because he was so amusing and because he did useful things too. He organized the first town baseball team and was captain and catcher. It was a great success its first year and a splendid advertisement for the town, and everyone admitted that Gus Bruck was the making of it. He had real baseball

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brains. A major-league scout came to town once to watch him in action and it was said that if he hadn't sprained his thumb on a foul tip that day he would have had an offer to go into professional baseball. He had musical talent too. He could rag a banjo like a professional and play *Turkey in the Straw* on a mouth organ so you couldn't keep your foot still. When the Elks Club put on a minstrel show he was manager, star performer and publicity man. The show was a wonderful advertisement for the town and cleaned up nearly eight hundred dollars for the library fund.

They used to say in those days that Gus Bruck could do anything but keep a job. He had several good ones at different times, and he was a capable fellow, but he wouldn't stick. Sooner or later he would either turn up drunk or fail to turn up at all. His playfulness had been all right for a time while he was young and he had been forgiven much because he was such a good fellow. But when other men of his age had married and

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settled down and were doing their work, he began to feel the subtle punishment of the town's disapproval. The word went around that he was no good. Luck turned against him too. He got a girl into trouble. She was nobody important—a hotel chambermaid—and his friends found the money to shut her up and send her away, but they made it clear to him that he was near the end of his rope. People began to shake their heads when they mentioned him.

And then he showed them. . . .

It was generally agreed that his wife deserved most of the credit. Anne Saunders was the last girl anyone would have expected him to marry. She was a quiet, home-keeping girl, religious and dignified. Gus had always liked them jolly and pretty and she was neither. Everyone was surprised when they began to be seen together and still more so when they ran away and got married. Everyone predicted a hard life for Anne.

But Gus made the turn right there. He went into the real-estate and insurance busi-

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ness, first as an outside man for a local firm and then on his own account. He proved to be a crack salesman. As Barney Gobel said, if you couldn't carry any more insurance you had better keep away from Gus Bruck because he would sell it to you anyway. He could make real estate move too. He didn't sit and wait for customers to come. Whenever he spotted a few thousand dollars that weren't working he would get his man by the ear, tell him what to buy and buzz him till he bought it. His greatest gift was for painting the future of the town. You could see it growing when you listened to Gus. He made you feel that if you didn't put your cash on a lot you were missing a sure thing. Of course, some lost money on him, but everyone knew real estate was a gamble. And Gus kept money moving, which was a good thing to do.

His reformation became no less a legend than his wildness had been. People pointed to him as an example of a fellow who had come near going to pot and then had pulled himself up and made good. Anne was a

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regular church-goer and she made him go with her now and then. Once he listened to a sermon which was supposed to be about the prodigal son, but was really based on his own life, and everybody knew it. He looked awfully embarrassed. Nobody knew whether he liked it or not.

After about ten years of happiness and prosperity, Gus had a relapse. He began to drink and play poker again and there was some talk about him in connexion with a pretty dressmaker. That spell of depravity came to an end when his second daughter, little Annie, was born. It was a premature delivery and his wife nearly died of it. They said that when she went to the hospital on short notice and a hurry call was sent out for Gus, he was found in bed with the dressmaker. Whether that was true, or just added to make it a good story, he was certainly all broken up with remorse.

Anne told friends afterward that when she thought she was going to die she was terribly frightened until it occurred to her that she

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would be a martyr and sit close to God, so that she could perhaps do more for Gus and the children in heaven than she could on earth. Then she was prepared to die happy. She was a wonderful woman, everybody agreed. Gus promised her to reform and never to drink another drop.

He kept his word, too, as far as liquor was concerned at least. He still played poker on Saturday nights, but not as he once had. He had been a gay and plunging player, who cared more for a fast game than for a fat pot. But now he played for blood with a face like a Chinaman. Everybody was afraid of him. When a boastful stranger with a roll came to town they always steered him up against Gus, and Gus would trim him at stud, without mercy and without a word.

In fact, at forty-five Gus was more than a little sour, and no one could see why. He had a wonderful wife and if he wasn't devoted to her he ought to have been. She had certainly dragged him right up from the gutter at least twice. And he had a fine business

and two pretty daughters. Of course, Annie was a little peculiar and Ruth was a little wild, to say the least. But nobody's children were perfect. All in all, Gus had done well. He was fat and prosperous. But he was crusty. Once in a while he would explode into his old-time joviality, but for the most part he wore a wrinkle between his eyes and kept a tight mouth. He became a hard dealer. He didn't talk so much about the future of the town any more. He didn't have to. Through his clients he controlled a lot of valuable property and he knew what everything was worth to a nickel. It was an off year he didn't make seven or eight thousand dollars, which put him well up in the second class of town incomes—the Buick-and-bungalow class. It may have been that he was sore because he couldn't drive a big car and build a big house.

At any rate, he had become a grouch, and none knew it better than his family. Ruth could remember well how much jollier he had been when she was a little girl and he

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took her for walks in the park. They were good pals then. She cared more for him than for anyone else—much more than for her mother. But during the past five years their relations had become steadily worse. He hardly ever kissed her any more. He disapproved of almost everything she did. He paid her bills, but never without grouching about it. He was always hearing things about her that upset him painfully, and then making a fuss about them. As least once a week there was a grand family row about what she had been doing and what she ought to do.

One of these rows hung over them now. Ruth and her mother both could see it coming. They knew the signs of paternal displeasure—his frown, his silence, his lack of appetite.

Mrs. Bruck looked as miserable as a woman sentenced to death. She was especially eager to avoid a scene to-day, and dread tightened the lines of her face, which habitually wore in repose an expression of acute anxiety. She was perpetually worried about something

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and generally about many things—about Ruth's wildness and Annie's nervousness and failures at school, about her own tonsils and the bills and her husband's temper, and what people said. She was painfully sensitive about Mr. Buck's disgraceful past and about all the talk that Ruth had caused. But her greed for worry was insatiable. If nothing about the family bothered her for a while, she would worry about bolshevism, the cost of living, or the decay of morality. At her best, when everything was going as well as could be expected, she achieved a quiet, half-scared happiness, but at the first threat of trouble her mouth pulled down at the corners and apprehension looked out of her eyes.

They were full of it now. Father was going to make a scene, she knew. Just when she wanted Ruth to look her sweetest and prettiest he was going to upset them all. In a thin dry voice she tried feebly to fend off the inevitable by making conversation.

"I do hope it'll be cooler this evening. The paper predicted rain. . . . Why don't

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you eat your salad, father? It won't keep in this weather. . . ."

Mr. Bruck disregarded her completely. He laid his knife and fork across his plate and pronounced his invariable preliminary to battle.

"Annie, since you seem to be through, you may leave the room."

Annie—small, skinny, dark—looked at him and blinked her eyes with astonishing rapidity. She seemed to be paralysed in her chair.

"Don't do that!" Mr. Bruck commanded. "It's nothing but a habit and there's no excuse for it. I've told you a thousand times not to blink that way. . . . Will you leave the room?"

Annie blinked faster than ever, squeezing out a tear or two in the process—then suddenly slid out of her chair and ran.

Mr. Bruck turned upon his remaining victims and cleared his throat.

"Ruth, there's one thing I want to have an understanding about. . . . You are not on any account to see anything more of that

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Romer fellow. . . . If you do, I shall refuse you the use of the car and stop your account at Greenbaum's. . . ."

"O father. . . . Please, father," Mrs. Bruck interceded with a quaver. "Ruth and I had a talk about that. My little girl has promised . . . really she has."

"She's promised a good many things!"

Mr. Bruck now turned upon his wife.

"Listen to this! Ralph Shaner came to me the other day and told me he had seen Ruth and that fellow up the valley in our car. Ralph is a brother Mason of mine and a fellow Kiwanis and I've known him for twenty years. He's as good a friend as I've got. He wouldn't come to me with any stories if he didn't think it was his duty. He was nice enough about it—said he thought I probably didn't know much about the man and Ruth didn't either. . . . Of course, everybody knows he's just a loafer and a lunger to boot. He left a wife behind him somewhere and he hasn't got a thing to his name but a little government disability pension—no job, no pro-

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fession, nothing but a cheap line of highbrow patter that women fall for. . . . It was bad enough for Ruth to run around with that good-for-nothing Billop kid. I didn't like it, but I didn't say anything because at least he belongs to the town and we know something about his folks. Billop's a client of mine and a brother Elk. . . . But this bum I won't stand for and that's flat! He's a wife-deserter and a fellow that makes a boast of his immorality. . . . Lives in some kind of a rat's nest on Fourth over a grocery store and what goes on there God only knows. He could get away with murder in that place and he probably does. It's as much as any girl's reputation is worth just to be seen alone with him. If Ruth ever goes near him again and I find it out, I'm going to stop her allowance and lock up the car. . . . That's flat! I slave and sweat to keep her dressed and God knows she buys enough clothes for six women and never has enough on at that, and then my reward is to have her go out and disgrace me and the whole family. . . ."

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He fell back in his chair, spent and perspiring, his collar a soppy ruin.

Ruth could feel her throat filling with rage and grief, tears pricking her eyelids. She was going to cry! She wanted to fight back but she was going to cry instead, as she always did at family rows.

"I'll say one thing for him," she gulped desperately. "He's the only man I know in this town that isn't an old woman. He's the only one that doesn't peddle a lot of lies about everybody he knows. . . ."

She broke into sobs, flung away from the table, swinging her hips and shoulders in frustrate rage, flopped down on the couch and buried her face in her arms. Mrs. Bruck rose and hurried to her side with short, quick, nervous steps.

"There, there, dear. . . . You mustn't cry. . . . You mustn't cry now. . . . Your eyes'll be red. . . ."

Mr. Bruck got up, threw down his napkin, snorted and stamped himself out of the house. It was his invariable technique of battle to

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fire a thundrous broadside, causing painful havoc, and then retire in fairly good order. As soon as he drew tears the action was over for him. He never fought an issue to a finish and he never carried out any of his threats.

Mrs. Bruck bent over Ruth, stroked her hair, patted her heaving shoulder—timid, tentative, frightened of this creature that had sprung from her womb so much stronger, more vivid and passionate than she was, and yet owning her, body and spirit. It was her agony to live in this being she could neither control nor comprehend, far more than she lived in herself. She had created, but not in her own image as she longed to do, still feebly tried to do. . . .

“O my darling! Please don’t cry. It’ll make your eyes red. And you’re freckled and sunburned, too. . . . O my pet, why will you do things like that? Why must you cheapen yourself by running after men that aren’t good enough to wipe your shoes, and let people talk about you the way they do? Can’t you see how foolish it is—how awful?

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If only you would stay at home and be nice and keep yourself sweet and white and pure! There wouldn't be a lovelier girl in town. . . . You don't understand life, dear. If you would only trust me. . . . You think there's something wonderful about love and passion. And there isn't, there isn't! It's just pain and sorrow. That's all it's ever been to me. There's nothing better in life than being sweet and good and doing your duty and having a nice home. . . . O my darling, if you would only believe me. . . . Please don't cry any more now. . . ."

But it was just this kind of thing that made her cry. She seldom cried and seldom felt like crying except when the family worked on her feelings, and then she couldn't help it. Under that thin gentle hand, that anxious tender voice, she lost herself, shrank and dwindled, became again a babe in arms, chidden and comforted. She was all remorse and repentance. For the moment she *was* sweet, pure, and good. Mother was right—for the moment.

Hot Saturday

They clung together, ever so close together, almost one, until her sobs died away and for a while afterwards, saying nothing, passive and peaceful, like lovers in the unity of spent emotion. Ruth finally sat up, hot and flushed, mopping her eyes.

"We've got to fix that lunch."

"Never you mind, darling. I'll fix it."

"No. . . I want to help. . . please. . . ."

"No, dear," firmly. "You go upstairs and bathe your eyes in boric acid and lie down and take a nap . . . after all you've been through! . . . I'll fix the lunch."

Her room was a record of her blooming. The white bedroom set her father had given her for her sixteenth birthday and her mother had contributed the white and blue chintz curtains and the blue silk bed-spread. When she graduated from high school the next year, they both gave her the ivory-backed toilet set which was spread out neatly on the dressing-table, with its bevelled oval mirror. High school was commemorated also by a blue and white pennant on the wall—she wouldn't

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have had it there if it hadn't matched the room—and by her framed diploma and a group photograph of her graduating class.

They were a goofy-looking bunch, she thought now, with the girls in long white dresses like night-gowns—funny how styles changed in a few years and how ridiculous the old ones looked—but she liked the picture because hers was almost the only good portrait in it. She was right in the middle beside Walt Gibby, the valedictorian, and she had a proud, far-away look in her eyes. Anyone might have guessed that she was in love with him then. Walt confronted the world with a stern, determined expression. She had thought he looked noble then, but it struck her now that he looked like a conceited young ass, which he certainly was. Almost anything in trousers seemed wonderful to her in those days. . . .

Being in her own room made her feel better and more like herself. Having bathed her eyes and her face and put on a blue silk kimono, she sat down before her dressing-

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table and looked at herself carefully in the glass to assess the damages of battle.

Her eyes were a little red, but nothing to worry about. Her complexion was high from sun and wind, and a few freckles were scattered across the bridge of her nose, but these defects did not worry her as they did her mother. Mother's ideal of a complexion was something like a potato sprout, but that was not really fashionable any more.

She stretched out on the bed and closed her eyes, feeling as though she could sleep. All of her troubles had run out of her, for the time being, with her tears. She was relaxed and pacified. But as soon as she lay down, the temperature seemed to rise about ten degrees. Wherever she touched the bed she perspired. Her pillow was like a hot water bottle. She moved restlessly about, pursuing the chimera of a cool spot.

It was the hottest day so far that summer. . . . Good thing they were going to the mountains. It would be cool up there. If only it didn't rain. . . .

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When she finally reached a point of rest for a few minutes, a lone fly that had evaded screen and escaped swatters and fly-paper, began an intermittent attack on her nose. She would open her eyes and make a pass at him and he would go away, but as soon as she closed them, he would be right back.

What did the brute want of her nose anyway? There was nothing on it but a little cold cream.

Finally she rose in rage, rolled up a newspaper, hunted the fly ferociously, cornered him in the window-sill and murdered him with a mighty wallop. This act of violence relieved her feelings but it also raised her temperature. At several points of contact she was sweating clear through her kimono.

No use trying to sleep in this oven. . . . A cool bath and then down cellar. Why hadn't she thought of it before? Mother didn't like her to go down in the cellar, but mother would be done with the lunch by this time and gone to her own room to rest.

In the bath-room she bunched her short

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flaming hair under a cool blue rubber cap, dropped off her kimono and retired behind the rubber curtain that confined the shower to the tub. She turned on the cold full force and took it with delicious shock on her face and chest, turned and writhed, hollowed and humped her back like a cat under caress, greedy of sensation. She felt as though she could have stayed under it all day. It seemed to wash away all thought and memory of everything else. There was nothing in the world but herself and cold water, drumming, trickling, running in sinuous silver all over her, wrapping her in a chilly silver film, filling her ears with its soft steady voice. . . . Finally, dry and cool, she got back into kimono and slippers and went silently to the cellar door and down into damp coolness.

Under a small cellar window was an old leather-covered couch with several broken springs, retired from the front room for permanent disability and antiquated model. It was littered with old magazines and Sunday newspapers—rich forage for idle browsing.

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Hidden under it were several books, including "Flaming Youth," "Jurgen," "What a Young Man Ought to Know," and "The Yoke." They had been acquired during several years by stealth or accident, devoured with keen curiosity, and buried here, like corpses of crime, for lack of a better place. She had not been forbidden to read them, but if mother ever found them it would mean a row.

The cellar had been her special province since the age of five. The little house lacked a nursery, so she had been allowed to play here, and to accumulate childish treasure. Many of her happiest memories were associated with the cellar. Hundreds of times as now she had lain here, feeling curiously secure and peaceful, staring up at a little oblong window flush with the lawn, where a yellow dandelion peeped at her, and an occasional sparrow hopped into sight for a moment and out again. She could just glimpse feet and legs going by on the sidewalk and it was an amusement that still sometimes captured her

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fancy to guess whose they were. She seldom went down cellar any more, because mother didn't like it. "It was all right when you were a little girl, but it seems ridiculous now." Despite this change in her relation to it, resulting from an accretion of dignity, the cellar remained a place of welcome refuge from the family, especially when no one knew she was there. It was almost the only place where forbidden or dubious literature could be read in peace and security, and it was still the warmest room in winter and the coolest in summer. Moreover, it had an attraction wholly indefinable. Going down into cool duskiess below the street was somehow comforting. It made her feel like a child again, sent her mind chasing back to a time before her real battle had begun.

She lay at full length on the old sofa, letting her kimono fall away from her, looking down upon her own outspread nakedness from the eminence of a cushion, as a traveller surveys a lovely country from a hill.

The blooming of her body was recent

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enough so that she still saw its ripe beauty sometimes with a thrill of voluptuous, hopeful wonder, as she had so often when first her breasts began to swell, her legs and arms to round and full.

At sixteen her body had seemed to her a certain promise of joy. . . . At twenty the promise remained bitterly unfulfilled.

CHAPTER FOUR



WALT Gibby was her first. The Gibbys lived next door then. She was eight and he was ten. She climbed the high green board fence that stood between them one day and saw little Walt digging. He was digging a long trench in his back yard, and near by he had boards to roof it, to cover with dirt, making a burrow—long, dark, deep, cool—to crawl into and hide. She perched on top of the fence, little fat legs dangling, little red curls framing a round chubby face. She was wholly captivated by his masculine enterprise, longed to be part of it. “Hello,” she ventured. Walt looked up dubious. “Hello,” he conceded, and went on digging. “Want me to help you?” she volunteered. “Nope,” said Walt. She pondered this. “I’ll come down and help you,” she decided. Walt submitted, helpless, and sus-

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picious at first. But comradeship in work overcame his skirt-shyness. They toiled together furiously, like two mating rodents. He ordered, she obeyed. He became more and more dominating, she submissive. The hole was finished, roofed. Its wide black swallowing mouth invited them. "You go in first," she said. "No," he said, "you go in first." She crawled in and he came after. Clear to the wider place at the end they crawled and there were jammed together in darkness and intimacy, titillating, revealing. "Oooo!" she cooed. "Gosh!" said Walt.

After a long still thrilling time came the voice of Walt's mother. "*Walter! Walter!*" Neither of them moved. Neither of them dared move. She was scared, but not as much as Walt. She could feel him tremble. The voice wandered about above them, finally sounded in terrifying volume at the mouth of the cave. "*Walter! Come out of there!*" But Walter was too scared to move. Then the earth opened above them and a long arm and a great hand descended and plucked Walt

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away from her by the collar. And the rest was terrible to remember, with Mrs. Gibby scolding and Walt howling and her scurrying for the fence, covered with dirt and disgrace. . . .

The romance so begun lapsed until high school. The Gibbys moved and Walt, although in the same grade, went to school in a different ward. Moreover, Walt was a boy's boy, large for his age and strong, a leader by right of weight and punch, famous for his skill in games. He was known as the best marble shot in the second ward at eleven. He won always at keeps. White chinies, brown and blue dubs, big bottle-green glassies and garnet-red agates he gathered and hoarded in bagfuls, counted and boasted about them, swapped them, haggled and fought over them—then cast them aside for a career in football and baseball.

At high school they met in the same room like strangers, so much were both of them changed when she was fifteen and he was seventeen. She was the best-looking girl in

the class with the possible exception of Eva Niflot. Eva had better features and a more delicate figure but was smaller, quiet, a little shy, with black hair and long narrow dark eyes. She and Eva were inevitably enemies, equal in charm and opposite in method and temper. Eva was discreet, adroit and cunning. She stood in with teachers and principal and she was ever so nice and innocent with elders and boys—but the things she could say in a whisper! She was the wise little girl that told all the other little girls all about it, loving to shock and amaze them with her knowledge—an adept in the pussyfoot and keyhole lore of mysteries that children gather. She was a precocious gossip, too, who posted everybody about everybody else in strictest confidence. Ruth was no less wise for her years and no less interested in the words on the fences and what they said about the Latin teacher and the oldest boy. She too tittered over the naïve carnalities of Virgil and Milton, feeling that those old boys lacked both taste and humour. But she had none of

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Eva's finesse and discretion. She was more inclined to blurt than to whisper and more likely to lose her temper and call names face to face than to backbite. She antagonized teachers by throwing notes and by loosing suddenly, whenever she felt like it, her rich contralto laugh, which almost always carried the class with it to the destruction of discipline.

It was not surprising that Eva gave it out as her confidential opinion that Ruth was a vulgar, loud-mouthed thing, nor that Ruth told Eva to her face that she was a dirty little sneak. Hair of two colours would have been pulled that day had not constituted authority interfered.

The real cause of war between them was Walt Gibby. He was president of the class, captain of the football team, organizer of the glee club, great man of the school. He had also the approval of his elders, was spoken of as a splendid boy and a nice clean boy. A long row of fat jobs sat waiting his choice when he should graduate.

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Either Ruth or Eva was sure to be his girl and for a long time Eva seemed to hold that honour. He took her to dances and walked home with her sometimes. But her hold on him was never secure. He looked at Ruth too much. Noticeably he looked and hesitated, for he was a careful lad, mindful of his good repute, and Ruth's red hair was a danger signal.

The thing that drew him at last to her side was her prowess in mathematics. For geometry she had a gift in which he was wholly lacking, and this deficiency threatened his prestige and even his graduation. It was the terrible moment of his life when he went to the blackboard and failed before his henchmen. It was his salvation when Ruth, sitting beside him after school, showed him how to do the next day's work and coached him for tests.

Eva then lost out bitterly for she was almost as helpless with an isosceles triangle as was Walt. Now Ruth and Walt went to school dances and movies together and late at

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night stood on her front porch saying good-bye, experimenting with kisses that grew longer and more complicated each time.

They walked home together almost every afternoon that spring, she proud beside him, when vacant lots were full of shouting children and dust of play hung golden before the sun.

Some of those afternoons she remembered still as the happiest she had ever known. She was so sure of everything then—of Walt and the future and the goodness of life. She seemed full to bursting of warm tenderness that longed to spend itself on everything alive. She stopped to pat dogs on the street and burred over babies and kittens. The whole world seemed, like herself, a thing of warm flesh eager for caresses. She was filled like a bud on a tree with earth-born forces pushing toward expansion. She was prettier than ever before and the world more beautiful. Full moons and blooming lilacs moved her almost to tears. Walt seemed to her a noble creature. To be sure, he *was*

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better-looking then, before he got so fat, but to her he had a beauty ineffable. He reminded her of the gods and heroes in a large illustrated volume of mythology that was part of the high-school library.

She and Walt talked a little of marriage and a house, idly, not making promises but merely weaving dreams. And alone she dreamed a great deal more. Her dreams were amazingly simple and unpretentious. She didn't want much in those days! She always dreamed of a little wooden cottage with a lawn and trees and lilac-bushes. She did not think at all of cars or grand pianos or even much of clothes. She saw herself in blue aprons with bare arms, cooking things, and had vague thoughts about babies. Cosiness and warmth and intimacy were what she craved.

Then they graduated and Walt delivered a thundering, red-faced valedictory on the subject of patriotism which was printed in full in the *Morning News*. He was frightfully stuck-up over it and so was she. Walt was

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going into the First National in the fall, and that was about the most promising start a boy could make. The First National was the heart of the town, controlling the money that was its life-blood. Newspapers and politicians took their orders from it and business men asked it what they could do. It was where Walt belonged.

The last of high school was the annual class picnic in Wild Cat Canyon. Every class in every school above the fourth grade had a picnic in the mountains at the end of the year and this had been the custom since the first school was founded in the eighties. A long four-horse carry-all had hauled to school picnics in the mountains men and women now grown grey, and Ruth could remember her own first picnics in the same ancient vehicle when cars were still scarce and uncertain. She could remember how they crawled across the sunburnt flatlands, and how it seemed as though blue mountains would never come close and be real.

Now in twenty cars they rushed at the blue

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mystery of distance and shattered it as a rock shatters glass. Twenty cars with blue-and-white HS pennants flying, horns blowing loaded tight and close with yelling, laughing, excited youth rushed up into mountains, stopped, scattered their loads first into lunching groups then into couples wandering wider and farther leaving chaperons propped comfortably against trees.

School picnics in the mountains had a feeling and function all their own, well understood and never stated. Groups of class and roomful, that had hung together all winter in little invisible nets of routine and discipline, now were thrown against mountains, shattered, reassembled in new patterns. Picnics were release and excitement. At picnics things happened—old relations broke and new ones formed. Boys and girls scattered in couples among rocks and trees and came back late and tired looking at each other with different eyes.

She ran up a mountain ahead of Walt and she felt light-footed and strong as a goat.

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Far away from everyone she led him, both laughing, among great round boulders milled by ancient seas, patchy scrub-oak like thick close hair on massive flanks, pine-trees lifting tall, round and strong above it. He began to help her, pulling her up steep places and catching her when she slipped.

Each time he touched her she grew weaker in the knees. His kisses were blows beating her down. These were not like kisses on the front porch with mother just overhead, probably awake and listening. There was nothing here to support a tension of caution and resistance. Here were only mountains and silence.

Her whole body narrowed to a channel of desire. She sank down at the foot of a tree with her eyes closed, grateful for his weight upon her, for every pressure of his hands and arms and mouth. . . .

A moment of sweet and terrible suspense . . . and then . . . he was gone!

When he saw there was no resistance in her he simply snatched himself out of peril, drop-

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ping her as a thing too hot to hold. . . . Frightened, astounded, he stood looking down at her. . . .

In her eyes he shrank suddenly. Her hero had evaporated in the heat of desire, and there remained only a scared little boy she remembered.

She was on her feet, shamed and angry. One disgusted, punishing look she gave him and walked away, back down the mountain, with him following uncomfortably silent.

Oh, she well enough understood! He was the splendid boy, the nice clean boy with the perfect reputation and the wonderful prospects. He couldn't take any chances. And she had threatened violation of the unwritten code which provides that a nice girl may go ever so far but no farther and that hers is the responsibility for stopping. If she had said don't at the right time, all would have been well. But there hadn't been a don't in her head. Everything in her had cried Yes. . . . He was right, of course, as he always was. And how she hated and despised him for it!

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The great big booby! The fraidycat! She could have leapt on his neck and bitten him!

After a little painful while he looked at her and grinned sheepishly and offered to help her over a rock. And she repulsed him with dignity. "No, thank you. I've been walking alone for years." That settled it. Her pride and bad temper settled it. "You're likely to walk alone for a good many more years." His reply was angry and disgusted. He probably did not mean it as a prophecy.

If she had accepted his help, tacitly acknowledged his superior made wisdom, they might have gotten over it. But after her refusal it was hopeless.

She preened her hair, powdered her nose, brushed pine needles off the back of her skirt, walked ahead of him, letting him look at what he had lost, at what he could never touch again—no, not if he crawled to her on his hands and knees!

• But he did no crawling—not he, the great man of his class! He went straight to Eva when they reassembled at the cars, and took

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her away from Henry Rogers as easily as if Henry hadn't been there. Eva was humble. Eva was all glad surprise. And he made the situation as plain to everybody as he could. He left Ruth sitting alone and fussed around Eva as though he had just discovered her. He left Ruth the odd girl in a car, wedged into a corner behind fat Nelly Darnell, who crushed her like a living symbol of her misery.

It seemed to her that never could any human have been so miserable before. She told herself she didn't care, that she was well shut of such a big booby, but her throat ached and tears she would not shed were hot upon her eyelids.

Cars roared home in moonlight. Voices singing in chorus rose above the hum of motors. Everybody was tired, relaxed, happy—everybody but she. Almost everybody was in someone else's arms. Each carload was knit together by arms and fingers into a single singing thing of melody and tenderness. And she was outside of it, hating the touch

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and sound of it—an outcast stoned for sins of pride and passion.

After a while they got back on to speaking terms, but she hated him and she knew he hated her. Moreover, Eva had him hard and fast. She was wearing a ring for him now and that would hold him as sure as though it had been through his nose with a string in Eva's hand. Old man Niflot was a considerable stockholder in the First National and it was said he liked Walt and was going to push him right along in the bank. Walt was seen driving his mother and Mrs. Niflot together in the Niflot car. It was clear to all that the relation between him and Eva had grown from the fragile sprout of a school flirtation into a sturdy permanent plant, rooted in family and business, strong to withstand all storms.

That was the end of her first affair and also the beginning of a reputation which had grown ever since.

The girl who lost her first man always carries as a handicap the current explanation of

how she came to lose him. The way such stories came into being and travelled was subtle and mysterious. Walt was too nice a boy to say anything about a girl—at least, anything explicit. Eva was a nice girl too, but she knew well enough that Ruth's rash and impulsive nature was what had scared Walt away and she probably did nothing to blight the growing legend of Ruth's wildness. She was conspicuously kind to Ruth now, and whenever she had anything to say about her she would end with a little formula. "But don't think she's not a nice sweet girl, because she is. I'm awfully fond of Ruth." This came back to Ruth several times. She hated Eva.

Yet she too carried tales when they came her way and no more thought about it than she thought about her breathing. She bore her part in this folk art of gossip, which everyone practised and everyone deplored—which was an instrument of social discipline and of personal revenge and an exercise of imagination for its own sake.

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She knew little in detail of what was said about her, but she knew exactly what her public and legendary character was. And unconsciously, by a subtle compulsion, she did many things to fatten it. Her slang and her damns, her bare knees and her bobbed hair and her lip-stick and the way she danced were all in character.

After high school for a while there were many parties where the old bunch forgathered and she went to most of them, sometimes with one boy and sometimes with another. But she had no steady. And so many of these boys who had grown up with her were going away—some to college and some to take jobs. Those who wanted to be lawyers and doctors had to go East to learn how. Some would come back and some would not. Many of the ambitious turned their backs on the town, rating it too small to serve them. It had nothing for Jim Parton who wanted to be a geologist. Nor for Hugh Connor who had the writing bug. He worked on the *Morning News* for a while, but having sold one fea-

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ture story to the New York *World*, he seemed to think New York could hardly wait until he got there. Bob Golden was headed for Detroit with a design for an improved spark plug and a determination to work himself into the engineering department of one of the big car factories. This town that had drawn young men from the East a generation before, now could not hold its native youth.

The trouble was, from her point of view, that three boys left the town for every girl that did. The men of her own generation were snatched away from her and nearly all of the older ones were already married. And what use were most of those that stayed at home and free? They got little piddling jobs at fifteen or twenty dollars a week. It took a boy ten years to get a start unless his father left him a business. Most of those she knew couldn't have paid for her clothes, much less for a house and a car. But would any of them look twice at a girl that didn't dress? Not they! A girl needed a thousand dollars' worth of clothes to interest a twenty-dollar-a-

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week man. Something was wrong somewhere.

She watched other girls get married. How did they do it? One thing that helped was a father with something to leave. She didn't miss that fact. She didn't fail to reflect that if dad had piled up something instead of spending it all as fast as he made it, she would have stood a better chance. Look at the four Gearhardt girls. They were all stupid and three of them were homely, but old Gearhardt owned real estate worth a couple of hundred thousand, and rising in value every year. All four of the girls got married. Of course they were awfully nice girls. None of them had enough gumption to be anything else.

Every man you smiled at imagined you were trying to marry him, or else his family did, even though he was nothing to marry. There was Ike Goldenweiser. He was a Jew, and that made a difference. It seemed to make more and more difference as the town grew. She and Ike had played together

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when they were little and her mother and Mrs. Goldenweiser had exchanged visits. The few Jews in the town then were all prominent business people and they were as much a part of its social life as any. But now the Jews were a different set, although a few old friendships between Jew and Gentile held.

She and Ike had been good friends all through high school. She saw hardly anything of him for about a year after graduation and then one day he brought her home in his car and they made a date to go to the movies. Four or five times they went out together and danced and had a good time. There was nothing to it—not even a kiss. They were both lonely, that was all. But mother and dad didn't like it much and apparently the Goldenweisers liked it even less. One day Ike called up, much embarrassed, to break a date and that was the last she saw of him for a long time.

It wasn't the last she heard, though. In about three weeks the story got around that old lady Goldenweiser had almost fainted when

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she saw them together and had said her son would marry a Gentile over her dead body. All the time he had been going with her, Ike had been fighting the family and he only gave in when his mother had a nervous collapse.

That was one more story on her going the rounds, and she could imagine just how it grew as it travelled. She had vamped Ike, of course, and tried to run away with him, and there would be the suggestion of an affair. That suggestion seemed to follow in the wake of all her flirtations. People so loved to believe the worst. . . . If she had done everything she got credit for, life wouldn't have been so dull. . . .

The only nice thing about it was Ike's attitude. He was the one man she felt sure hadn't told any lies. He didn't seem to feel he had to save his own face, as so many men did. . . . When they met on the street about a month later he stood before her, blushing, with his hat off, determined to say something if it killed him.

"Y'know, Ruth," it came out slow and hard,

"I would have stuck if it had been possible. . . . It was just as impossible for you as it was for me . . . and it was harder for me . . . a darn sight harder!"

"I know, Ike."

They stood a little while uneasily and then parted. But she went away feeling good. She knew now Ike was in love with her, and the knowledge filled her with a pleasant sustaining warmth. She walked home slowly, remembering how he used to bring her apples and candy in the cellar when neither of them understood about the strange high fence that stands between Jew and Gentile.

Conny Billop was the last boy of her own generation in the town she ever ran around with. It was a foolish thing to do, of course. Conny had already established himself as town good-for-nothing. He had flunked out of high school in his sophomore year and never come back. He never seemed to hold a job more than a month. But he was a man—at least in looks. He could dance. He had the

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family car three times a week. And she was so lonely.

Moreover, as they soon found, they had a shared emotion in their hatred for the town, and Conny had the ability to express it. The boy could talk—no doubt of that. It was hard to understand how he could flunk in English, for he certainly could use language in his own way.

It was Conny's consoling conviction that he had abilities which in some other place would flower to the amazement of men, but that the town was too narrow a place for him.

"I'm gonna blow!" He said it again and again. It was the explosive peroration of all his diatribes. But he set no date for blowing, and everyone knew that Conny was full of hot air. He told the most amazing stories of his own doings. Many of them were certainly lies and yet he made them so plausible that it was hard not to believe. What was more, he made them interesting and often funny. He amused her.

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The first thing they discovered in common was a passionate love of motors and of fast and reckless driving. Both of them had been born with the automobile industry and had grown up with it. They had learned to drive before they were old enough to take out licences, and had the perfect skill and self-confidence which can be acquired only in early youth. To both of them cars had been excitement and escape. Cars had widened their lives, made many of the differences between them and the older generation they had to fight. They went for long drives together several times a week, sometimes in the Billop Chandler, and when that was not available, in the Bruck Buick. They would lift a white trail of dust fifty or a hundred miles across hard prairie roads, caring not at all where they went, revelling in speed and wind. Several times they parked in a side road near River Hall and Conny went in, bought a couple of highballs and sneaked them out to her with exaggerated precaution. They drank with chuckles of triumph. This was

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defiance of every authority they knew. It was against the law, and would have scandalized the old folks had they known it. The bitter draught was sweet with juices of rebellion.

"Here's to crime," said Conny, as he lifted his glass.

Ruth choked a little on hers, but once it was down it was fine. As they flew home she sang to the tune of the motor, rocked with laughter at Conny's stories, felt that life after all was beautiful and free.

Some nights they parked at the top of Hair-pin Hill, from which they saw the town as a small bright far-away splatter of lights. They sat above it and in growing confidence and sympathy they talked about it. Conny did four-fifths of the talking and she was content to listen. She knew that Conny was a liar and a four-flusher, although she did not then apply those words to him even in her own mind. But his lies and bluffs catered to the need of her soul, even when she knew them for what they were. It was Conny who first

made her think of the town as a thing that stood between her and her desires. And Conny also greatly stimulated her dreams of far places by his own endless talk about them.

"Y'know what I'm gonna do, Ruth? I'm gonna get a job and save me up a roll of jack—say a thousand bucks—and then I'm gonna blow for New York. There's a hundred chances in New York for one here and there's something to do when you're not working. You can go to a different show every night in the year and you can see all the big-league games and the heavy-weight scraps. And there's that night life on Broadway. In a place like New York you can do what you please and get away with it! . . ."

She did not believe Conny would ever see the lights of Broadway—at least not for a long time. Neither did Conny's conception of metropolitan life as an endless show especially interest her. But, given the idea, she had imagination enough to create a New York of her own and see herself in it—a world of limitless freedom, where men and money

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abounded, and where, above all, she would not walk haunted by the ghosts of all her follies.

She began now to despise the humble dreams that had grown in the warmth of her first love. Cottages, babies, aprons and apple pies seemed trivial to her now. She began to picture for herself great rewards and triumphs. . . .

So she felt Conny's strength in words even as she sensed his weakness in action and both of them drew her toward him, stirred her tenderness.

She rated herself a cynic now—an embittered woman. She had been prepared to despise Conny and had taken up with him only because nothing better offered. But she could feel her hardness melting more at every contact. She was not in love with him, she felt sure, but she loved to hear him talk. And she longed to comfort him. She felt the misery under his brave words—the misery of rejection and defeat which she too had known. She longed to make him happy with caresses. She felt generous and warm.

She was fascinated by his hands. They were long, slim, brown hands, restless and graceful with a cigarette, quick and easy on wheel and gearshift. She knew that soon his hands would come seeking her and she began to be impatient for the time.

Conny was certainly slower than she would ever have imagined—than anyone would have imagined who heard him talk. A bold and reckless fellow he pictured himself. Yet when silences of sympathy fell upon them as they sat in the parked car, no one within miles, Conny seemed uncomfortable. Moments came when kisses seemed as inevitable as sunrise, but Conny let them pass. He figeted and cleared his throat and lit another cigarette. She could feel his eyes exploring her, yearning toward her, but his hands seemed afraid to follow. And when finally they did come, they came like timid dogs, whipped but hungry. He fumbled at her hand nervously. He was like a little child tugging at her skirt, afraid to ask for what he wanted.

She laughed and let herself fall against him,

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almost put herself in his arms. And so they achieved their first kiss.

That first evening of unself-conscious intimacy was the best they ever knew of each other. Their kisses seemed for the moment a complete and perfect consummation. They would kiss and laugh and kiss again. They were wholly acceptable to each other and as delighted as children who bite an apple and find it sweet. They parted tingling and flushed with sympathy and desire.

But when next they met a few days later, Conny seemed wholly changed. He was a curious mixture of anxiety and insistence. He was inclined to bully and compel her so that she stiffened against him and the miracle of warm confluence they had known at first was wholly lacking. Conny also dragged into the conversation, not very cleverly, some cynical views about marriage. He spoke of Eva's engagement to Walt Gibby. They were going to be married in the fall.

"I can't see it—this early marriage stuff," Conny announced. ". . . It ties a fellow

down too much. . . . I'm gonna play it alone for a while, believe *me!*"

She could feel her face redden. The little chump! Of all the boys in town—and they were a sorry lot—he would be about the last any girl with a grain of sense would choose for a husband. He couldn't support a canary bird. He deserved to be reassured without delay and she gave him what he bid for.

"Don't imagine *I* want to marry you, Conny." Her voice was like a dipperful of ice water. "That's not what I want at all."

It silenced Conny and it ruined a beautiful moonlit evening. He stayed away for a week and at first she thought it was all over. He didn't want to marry her, yet it pained and surprised him to learn that she didn't want to marry him. . . . But presently he came back, good-natured again at first, laughing and full of stories. In a measure he won her all over—until he began to make love.

He who had been so timid, now was full of what the girls called cave-man stuff. He was bent on a triumph of sheer masculine strength.

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It was a rôle for which he lacked talent. She could imagine herself being overwhelmed by a strong man. In fact she had imagined it more than once with voluptuous delight. Her favourite figure of fantasy was a man strong and ruthless, yet gentle too. But Conny was not a strong man either in muscle or in personality. She found that she could hold him with ease and got satisfaction out of doing so. He threw out bold and desperate hints as to what they might do, indicated that he was prepared for any emergency.

"You needn't be afraid, Ruth. . . . I'm wise to things. . . ."

When she tittered he was angry. What a fool he was! If he had been decent about it she might have done anything for him. . . .

She was tempted to make an end of the affair more than once, but something about it held her. She got fun out of thwarting him. It was a struggle between them and she was minded to see it through. And she was not without hope that Conny would change and they would find their way back to the sympa-

thy that first had drawn them together.

But Conny became surlier and more difficult. One evening, when he had parked the car and turned toward her, she knew by the smell of his breath that he had primed himself for a great effort. When she held him off, his hands suddenly closed on her in a spasm of violence and his face and neck reddened. For the first time she was a little afraid of him. . . .

"You will!"

"I won't!"

And then his preposterous ultimatum—one that was old in the lore of venery men trade on street corners, one that he had doubtless heard and admired.

"Either you will or you'll get out and walk!"

The little wretch! Suddenly his whole attitude was revealed to her. She was a fast girl and his masculine vanity demanded her surrender. He believed others had had her and therefore he must have her too. It was disgrace to let such a girl play with him. . . .

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Her red-headed temper boiled up and flooded her body with a burning urge to violence. He was bending over her. She rose up under him with a sudden astonishing strength, and gave him a mighty shove. Long and ungainly he tripped, lurched and toppled over the door, landing on his hands and knees in the road, spoiling his beautiful ice-cream trousers. She slid into the driver's seat, threw on the switch and would have left him there had she not turned to face him as he rose. He looked so pitiful! His face was white and his lips trembling. She thought he would cry. . . .

She slumped in a sudden revulsion of disgust and weariness.

"Get in," she said.

They spoke no word on the way home and avoided each other on the streets for weeks. But when they met, they were polite, because each was afraid of the other. He had not much to fear, but she had a great deal. . . . If there was anything Conny wouldn't tell—in his own way—when he was sober, it was

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only a matter of waiting till he was drunk. . . .

After the break with Conny, life was duller for a while than ever it had been before. Days seemed endless and empty, try as she would to fill them. She made the most of buying a new hat, going to every store in town before she decided. She looked forward to the days when she would have her hair shampooed and listen to Miss Shane's spicy chatter. Time and again she wandered up and down the few shelves of the public library, trying this book and that, finding them only a wilderness of dull words. She went to each of the two movie theatres every week and that furnished about two hours of mild diversion at best. Often it was merely a bore.

For this boredom and emptiness her mother had a remedy. In fact, she had two of them—crochet and embroidery. It was mother's simple conception of feminine destiny that a girl should sit on the front porch and do fancy work until the right man came along and then marry him. Ruth not only had no taste for

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the needle, but also it provided her with no adequate outlet for her energies. The hardest thing for her to do was to sit still.

Long afternoons she spent trying to sew just to please her mother, muddling stitches and puckering cloth, marvelling at the deftness of the elder's fingers. As they worked they talked and mother told her about her own girlhood and how much better-behaved girls were then.

Well . . . no wonder! They had no cars and never went anywhere. Their idea of a wild time was playing post office with four chaperons on the job. It was a scandal if a couple went for a stroll in the dark between dances. And almost everyone seemed to get married right away as a matter of course. Men stayed home and married in those days. That seemed to make the big difference.

Bridge also sufficed to fill a few hours. . . . Almost all the married women in town played bridge in the afternoon, as the men played poker at night. The whole town shuffled cards.

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Bridge clubs met in rotation at the homes of members and battled bitterly for salad bowls and dessert spoons. When a girl had been in society about two years without getting married she was likely to take up bridge in a serious way, and Ruth took it up and liked it fairly well. She was a plunging bidder but played a canny hand and carried home a certain amount of electroplated tableware.

Far worse than her days were her nights. Time after time she dressed carefully and went down and sat on the front porch, thinking maybe somebody would drop in. But it was seldom anyone did. She sat looking bitterly at her empty hands, her pretty idle arms. There were nights when she hated the telephone for not ringing, nights when full moons shone on her loneliness and made it ache.

Summer was always a dull time, because it was so hot and so many people left town. Things would pick up in the fall. So she comforted herself. But she knew that for her only something wholly unforeseen could make much difference. In the fall a new crop of

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buds would be out to claim the interest of men. Already some parties were being given for them. Mrs. Nooney gave a dance for the Nooney twins who were sixteen and Ruth wasn't invited, although Clara Nooney, the elder sister, had been one of her classmates in high school. Of course it was a dance for the younger set and at twenty she was already out of that. Still, she knew that some of Clara's friends were invited to the dance. And she knew too that Mrs. Nooney had more than once expressed disapproval of her—of the way she danced and painted her mouth. And Clara couldn't hide her embarrassment when they first met afterward. Probably Clara had wanted to ask her and Mrs. Nooney had refused. . . . It was older women that made you feel your rep. . . .

She thought of work as an escape from boredom, and brought the subject up in family council around the dinner table. She had no ambition and, what was worse, no special talent. These women you read about who had careers nearly all seemed to be gifted crea-

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tures. They wrote or painted or sang or acted. She couldn't do any of those things. But anything would be better than more years like this last one. And if she got a job and saved money she might go away and do better somewhere else.

That dream of departure was the real source of all her interest in working. It was a vague dream, because she knew nothing about either work or the great cities toward which her imagination set, but it always contained one scene, with slight variations. She pictured herself sitting before a wide rosewood desk with a glass top in a sumptuously furnished office far above the rumble of a city street. She was some kind of a secretary and had a note-book before her. These details were not very clear, but she thought a good deal about what she might be wearing. A cream-coloured georgette blouse, rather low in front and short in the sleeves, with a simple pleated skirt, seemed to her about the most appropriate in the circumstances. . . . On the other side of the desk sat a man. He was young, but

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not so very young. There was a little grey in his heavy black hair. He was tall, broad-shouldered and lean, with a mouth and chin firm in decision, and slightly reckless eyes. He rose and paced the floor, apparently in deep thought. He spoke a few important words which she dutifully noted down, then suddenly stepped to her side, laid his hand on her arm. . . . "Little girl, little girl, I can't dictate to you! I love you. . . ."

It was a long drop from that dream to a discussion of ways and means with mother and father. Neither of them wholly disapproved of her desire to be useful and busy, but when it came to considering what she could do, there were just two things. She could get a job teaching in the primary schools, with a country assignment and a salary of forty dollars a month to start on, or else she could learn stenography and go into an office.

Mother was firmly against school-teaching. "It absolutely ruins girls for society. They get nervous and wrinkled and their voices are simply awful. You can tell a school-teacher

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right away. . . . And the pay is almost nothing."

Father pointed out that pay was no object. He could afford to support his family and didn't want his business associates to think that his daughter had to work for a living. If Ruth must work it seemed to him that school-teaching was the proper thing. Unmarried women had always taught school, even when he was a boy. "But one thing is certain—I won't have her take up stenography and go into an office where she'll be thrown into contact with every Tom, Dick and Harry that comes along. . . ." So the question rested and so it seemed likely to rest for a long time.

She and Alma Budlong discussed work more than once. Alma thought if Ruth wanted to work, the family ought to send her away to college and let her learn a profession.

"They would do it for a boy if it took their last penny. Why shouldn't they do it for you?" Alma demanded hotly.

It was good logic but Ruth knew the family would never see it and she did not even pass

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it on to them. But she was comforted and flattered by the serious interest Alma took in her problems. In fact, her friendship with Alma did more than anything else to make life endurable that summer.

She had always been somewhat in awe of the entire Budlong establishment. When Mrs. Budlong was alive and the Judge at the height of his political glory, the Budlongs were the social leaders of the town. She had never been inside their house in those days. She remembered being thrilled to her toes when she was passing it one day as a little girl on her way to school, and the Judge in his courtly manner invited her to come into the yard and pick lilacs.

With Mrs. Budlong dead, the old Judge poor and senile, and Alma working, the glory of the Budlongs was only a memory, but the memory still gave them a certain prestige. When distinguished strangers came to town Alma always had them to tea, and when anyone of social importance gave a large entertainment Alma was sure to be invited. Al-

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most anything Alma chose to do was all right. She was one of the first women in town to smoke openly. Not many others would have dared to start, but when Alma started, several dared to follow. Among the women she had a place of undeniable leadership. When old Mrs. Barstow saw her smoking and heard a sample of her advanced conversation at a tea, she expressed the opinion that Alma was nothing less than fast. Now that from old lady Barstow would have been a heavy blow to most, but when it came back to Alma she went around telling it to everyone as a good joke. She seemed really delighted with it. And it *was* a good joke, for that matter. Everyone knew that Alma wasn't fast, but only Alma could have turned the old lady's dirty dig back at her that way. Instead of making Alma look fast it made old lady Barstow look ridiculous.

In the library, too, she had done things no one else would have attempted. She made the city council double the appropriation for books and she made the board of governors

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buy whatever books she told them to buy. She certainly had furnished the town with some spicy reading. Out went the Elsie books and Mühlbach's historical romances and a lot of other stuff that had slept under the dust for years. In came H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett and even Dreiser and Mencken. She had the popular authors, too, such as Harold Bell Wright and Zane Grey, but she pushed the highbrow stuff. It was a favourite amusement of hers to pick out some highbrow shocker, by D. H. Lawrence or W. L. George, persuade a lot of women to read it, and then tell around what they said. Some were angry, but it soon would become an accepted fact that if you hadn't read the book you were behind the times, and if you admitted being shocked, as almost everyone was, you were positively antiquated. No one but Alma could have done that.

She had an easy way of taking up with people that interested her, no matter who, and making it seem the most natural thing to do. She stepped across social lines that were high

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walls to others. She had done that in a measure when she took up with Ruth. They had known each other as long as Ruth could remember, but their families had not moved in the same circles. And as the town grew, circles had become more and more distinct.

Their friendship began with a chat in the library and with Ruth driving Alma home and staying for lunch. After that she often brought Alma home and they spent long times together. Their conversations were all alike. Ruth told Alma all about everything—except some details that she felt Alma wouldn't understand—and Alma listened eagerly, almost greedily, and gave advice and comfort. Sometimes, after bewildering wars with the family, she wept on Alma's shoulder and Alma kissed her and petted her and told her not to worry. So they established a satisfying interchange, for Alma's sympathy was as sweet to her as the stories of her fights and flirtations were entertaining to Alma. The only sympathy she got at home was from her

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mother and that always made her feel little and helpless and erring. To mother she was always a bad little girl to be forgiven and wept over. But to Alma she was a person with a problem.

"You may as well face your problem for what it is," Alma told her. "You've got to marry and settle down or else get a job. And there isn't a man in the town anyone could want very desperately to marry and there isn't a job that has any future for a woman. . . . I thought it all over long ago and decided I'd much rather work and be independent, and I don't regret my choice. But just the same, it makes me tired to see men with about a spoonful of brains making four times as much as I can ever hope to make."

Ruth nodded and agreed, but she did not really accept that dilemma as her destiny. She lived in hope of the unforeseen. She never looked at herself in the glass when she was at her best, without feeling a surge of hopeful confidence. . . . But Alma neverthe-

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less watered the flower of her spirit when it drooped. Alma made her see herself as a significant and interesting figure.

Then, too, merely to be seen driving with Alma was a help. It offset the disapproval of women like Mrs. Nooney. And it helped still more when Alma gave a tea, and in her prettiest frock Ruth passed cookies and sandwiches ever so sweetly to some of her worst enemies.

Not many men came to Alma's house, and most of those who did were married. But she met strangers there, and strangers interested her more and more. It was at Alma's that she met John Romer, although not exactly by Alma's express intention.

She had heard of the man for months, knew him by sight and felt an urgent curiosity about him. For one thing, she knew that he interested other women. She had heard stories about him and Mrs. Pell. Of course, Mrs. Pell had only to be seen more than twice with any man to start a scandal, because she was pretty, despite her thirty-eight years, had been

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twice divorced and lived alone. But the amount of talk she heard about him at teas and bridge parties was enough to prove him an attractive man.

It was enough, also, to classify him in her mind. Strangers who came to town were mostly of two kinds, commonly described as lungers and nuts. The lungers came for the climate and were an important business asset. They kept the sanitariums full and were a great help to undertakers, florists and lawyers, because forty per cent of them died there. Nearly every week through trains brought a few on stretchers and took a few away in boxes. They included all sorts of people from the pauper with one lung who kept throwing a brick through the window of the First National until they finally put him in a san and cured him just to get rid of him, to the millionaire shoe man who did cobbling to kill time and delivered his finished work in a Packard car. Lungers gave the town an increasingly cosmopolitan air, and they developed its tolerance by putting an incessant

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strain upon it. Much could be said against them, but they brought in about a million a year and that answered all objections.

Nuts included all the writing, painting, scientific people who were drawn to that quarter by Indians, mountains and the Historic Past. Most of them went on to Santa Fe and Taos but the New Mexico art colonies were near enough so that Ruth had heard much of their wonders. They said there was a poet in Taos who wore a Chinese silk suit and seven Navajo bracelets, and a woman up there with a million dollars married a big fat buck Indian. Could you imagine that? Most of those people, if you could believe what you heard, didn't have a moral to their names and were proud of it. The Nooneys drove up there once and when she came back Mrs. Nooney said she would never go near the place again—at least as long as the girls were unmarried. Lots of people disapproved of the nuts, but yet when a painter came to town they always made a fuss over him and sometimes even bought his pictures. And it was generally,

recognized that the nuts were good advertising. They wrote about the country in the magazines and sold pictures of it in the East and were a tourist attraction, no less than the cliff dwellings and the snake dance. They brought money to the country. You couldn't overlook that. Even the First National had extended them official recognition to the extent of hanging a few of their pictures on the walls.

Romer was identified with both of these exotic classes. He had emerged upon the town from a san, and although his only occupation seemed to be drawing a government pension, his conversation had a distinctly nutty flavour. Some said he was shell-shocked, and if he had accepted this familiar classification it would have been a great help to him socially. But he declined it—said he never even heard a gun go off.

For Ruth he had the charm of the mysterious and the forbidden. He was a new kind of man and one the family would be sure to disapprove. She was aware of an inquisitive

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interest in him. But she knew it would be imprudent to have anything to do with him, and she decided that she wouldn't, even if she had the chance. She was tired of foolish affairs that ended in disappointment. . . .

One afternoon she saw him walking home with Alma and that reminded her she had something to tell Alma. So she drove over to the Budlong's and dropped in. At the door she hesitated when she saw them having tea. Alma didn't look at all glad to see her.

"I thought you were alone," she lied. "No, I can't stay but a minute. . . ." She just nodded and smiled at Romer, but he came forward and shook hands. He wore a shabby suit and a soft shirt, had thick dark hair and a skin burned red and pulled lean over his cheek-bones. He didn't look sick and neither did he look formidable. His interested, eager eyes were the most noticeable thing about him and he had a good handshake, warm, dry and firm, that you didn't want to get away from. Alma was sitting on a cushion on the floor smoking a cigarette, which meant that

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she was putting on her most advanced front. She and Romer talked about plays and books and the art of the Pueblos and American civilization and a lot of other things Ruth knew nothing about. She couldn't find a place to put in a word but she didn't feel out of it because Romer kept looking at her, even when he was talking to Alma. Whenever their eyes met she smiled at him.

Alma was always at her worst with men—affected and trying desperately to seem younger than she was. Men seldom saw the real Alma who was genuine and funny. It seemed to Ruth that she was trying desperately now to impress Romer with how much she knew and how superior she was to the town.

"You must find the place awfully dull," she consoled. "But if you stay long enough, maybe you'll like it better. You mustn't judge it by the way it is in the hot weather. So many people are out of town."

"I like it now," Romer said. "Of course, a man that's been in armies and hospitals for

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years and suddenly finds himself free again would probably like it almost anywhere. It feels so good I can hardly believe it . . . I want to celebrate every day. But anyway I grew up in a town about this size in Indiana, so it's next thing to home for me."

He and Alma pattered on and Ruth sat there, knowing she ought to go, that Alma did not want her to stay. . . .

They had a long argument as to whether people were becoming more broad-minded. Alma argued that they were. She claimed that a great change had come over the town in the past ten years or so. People read more and better books now and were interested in art and so many of them were trying to write something themselves. And they were not nearly so narrow about . . . well . . . everything. Young girls had so much more freedom, for instance, than they used to have.

Romer agreed there had been a great change since the war, but he thought the difference was in circumstances, not in people.

"Women have more freedom all right, but

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very few of them want it. I suppose some of the girls get to like their freedom, but most of them would trade it in a minute for a good income and a reliable husband. . . ."

This provoked Alma to indignant disagreement. She had the idea that women were consciously creating a new social order. They didn't need men any more as once they did.

To get himself out of a hot corner in the argument, Romer tried to drag Ruth into it.

"What do you think, Miss Bruck? Is your place in the home or out of it?"

Ruth thought in silence that the whole discussion was twaddle, and that Romer had a nice voice and nice eyes, and it was too bad he had so many crazy ideas and no job. . . . She had no intention of making herself ridiculous by talking. She knew she was out of her conversational depth. She smiled at him, archly but sweetly.

"I've quit thinking for the summer," she said, rising and smoothing her skirt. He laughed and rose too. As he did so, she felt a thrill of triumph, mingled with one of con-

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trition. She knew that she had as good as lifted him out of his chair by the power of her smile, and she knew that Alma resented it—both her staying and her taking Romer away.

“Don’t go yet,” Alma asked, talking exclusively and pointedly to Romer. “It’s early. . . .”

“No, I must get along . . . have an appointment. . . . It’s been awfully nice.”

So there they were outside together with her car before them, and the least she could do was to offer to set him down somewhere. . . .

It was nearly dark when she finally did leave him near his rooms on Second Street, and she got home late for dinner with her hair rumpled and her face flushed.

She simply hadn’t been able to resist the temptation to take him for a little spin. For one thing, she wanted to prove that he didn’t really have an appointment. And then they had turned up a side road, just to see where it went, and lurched precariously through a dry ditch and brought up at the end of the road in a thick clump of cottonwoods, laughing at

themselves. [They might have guessed the road didn't go anywhere!

There they sat for an hour, just talking—until they got into a tussle over a piece of paper on which he had made a sketch of her profile. He refused to let her see it, because it didn't do her justice, he said. She made a grab for it, and he tried to take it away from her, both of them laughing and excited. It was awfully kiddish. Finally she stuffed the paper down the front of her blouse and he went right after it!

What could you do with a man like that? It was somehow impossible to be indignant with him. He was perfectly irrepressible. . . . And yet the only gentle lover she had ever known. . . .

She didn't ask him to call because she knew the family wouldn't stand for it and he didn't suggest it either. He did ask her to come to see him some time, in a way that implied that he knew she probably wouldn't. She gave him an arch look and thanked him just the same, but she wasn't in the habit of calling on

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men! So they parted without making a date.

That, she supposed, was the end of it and she meant that it should be. He was awfully interesting and all that, but he was nothing to marry and being seen with him would just start one more story. And absolutely nothing would come of it, even if she were willing—which she wasn't!

Not that he wasn't an attractive man in a way. He was exciting, and there was something reassuring about him too. If it came to that, she thought she would rather take a chance on him than on any man she had ever met. He seemed to know what he was about, which was more than she could say for most of them. But, of course, it was out of the question. . . . That place of his . . . It might not be so impossible to go there in the evening and it would be fun just to see what kind of a place he had. But what a foolish thing to do! If anybody did find it out . . . But anyway they probably wouldn't meet again. . . .

As she drove around town the next few

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days, every time she saw a man in a grey suit like his she looked a second time to be sure it wasn't Romer.

She was *not* looking for him. She wasn't even thinking about him. But she had not entirely forgotten him, either.

When she finally did see him he was sitting there on a park bench smoking his pipe in mid-morning like a bum out of a job. Her blood jumped and she put on the brakes without thinking any more what she was doing than if a collision had threatened. He came forward smiling, and there they were again. . . . It would certainly be better to talk to him in some less conspicuous place. So she invited him to ride.

She fairly flew with him back to that same place, and as they sped up the valley the wind in her face seemed strangely exhilarating.

It happened that way time after time—not every day but several times a week. She was taking chances, she knew, but she was also having fun.

After every time she saw him she simply

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dismissed him from her mind, thinking probably they would never meet again. He was curiously hard to think about, anyway. She built no daydreams upon him because he offered nothing she dared or cared to dream about. It wasn't love or adventure she wanted any more, but triumph. . . .

And yet every morning she dressed with the most unwonted care from her best peach-coloured step-in to the last dab of powder on her nose, and she was greedy for errands that would award her the use of the car. . . . Mornings when she couldn't get it her temper was terrible.

Once in the evening she drove past his place and noticed there wasn't any light.

What put an end to it all was the advent of the Fadden boy. He filled her mind with ideas that crowded Romer out. She went around blocks to avoid the corner where they used to meet, and she hoped to God no one had seen them together—at least no one Wilbur Fadden knew.

CHAPTER FIVE



UPSTAIRS again she frowned over the problem of what to wear. She wanted to look sweet and dainty but not too dainty to climb a mountain.

It was ten minutes of four but that was all right. She wanted to come down late.

Finally she decided on a white silk blouse and a brown skirt with a green sport jersey and brown stockings and oxfords.

She could hear them arriving and mother receiving them—could pick out Alma's high, excited voice, Doc Jagers' husky one and a word or two from the boy, bringing up to her an unmistakable note of embarrassment. He seemed to be perpetually embarrassed.

"Ruth!" It was her mother calling. "We're ready to start whenever you are, dear."

"I'll be down in a jiffy," she answered. "You people go ahead and get in the car. . . ."

After that she spent several minutes more before the mirror, studying herself earnestly with the help of a hand-glass. She used a hand-glass a great deal because she loved to look at her profile. It was regular and what people called pure. She always had her picture taken in profile with her chin slightly lifted and her eyes rolled upward and the effect was one of singular sweetness and elevation—almost Madonna-like, she knew—especially when she was dressed in white.

It was her profile that he would see mostly, driving out. . . . She turned and smiled at herself full face. The effect was almost that of meeting another person—an impish-looking person with lips that curved provocatively and eyes that narrowed to mischievous slits. It was not the expression she wanted to-day. Deliberately she sought to tame it but it couldn't be done. When she tried to look innocent she merely looked ridiculous. She ended by making a face at herself and jumping up. . . . They were calling her again.

"Comi—i—ing!" she called.

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Before leaving the room she glanced out the window. Wilbur was wedged into the back seat between Alma and her mother with his shoulders hunched up and his large hands dangling between his knees, wearing an expression of hopeless discomfort. Doc Jagers was putting coats and rugs into the car and little Annie was capering around, yelling shrill questions and getting in the way.

It would never do. She would have to get him out of there and into the front seat. . . . She ran downstairs and out upon the porch, stopped at the head of the steps, radiant and smiling, like an actress taking an encore.

"Hello, everybody!" she sang. "Isn't it a peach of a day!"

"No, it's not," countered Doc, who was a good-natured grouch. "It's the hottest August day we've had here since 1872 and I'll bet you what you want it'll rain pitchforks and nigger-babies out in that canyon. . . ."

But they weren't listening to him, they were looking at her. Each face except his reflected toward her a different emotion. She

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was aware of her mother's adoring anxious eyes and of Alma's—fond, amused and a little irritated as they always were when she showed off—but especially of Wilbur's. He seemed to contemplate her with a stunned and astonished delight, his mouth open, as though she were even more beautiful than he had remembered. He looked ridiculous, he looked absurdly young—and his ridiculous young adoration sweetly fed her spirit, filled her with conquering confidence.

"O Doc! I forgot my jersey. It's in the hall. Run in and get it for me . . . will you please?"

She ran down the steps as she said it, so he had to go with a laughing grumble. She seized the handle of a heavy basket—mother always made lunches that weighed a ton—and threw her brightest smile at Wilbur.

"Give me a lift with this—will you please, Mr. Fadden?"

"Oh, sure . . . of course . . . excuse me. . . ." He floundered and mumbled himself out of the back seat, seized the basket and

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flung it into the car with tremendous energy, as though action gave him relief.

Instantly she jumped into the driver's seat, and patted the cushion as though he had been a half-trained pup, at the same time throwing over him the net of her smile. . . . He wavered a moment and then climbed in beside her.

"Mamma, can I ride up front?" little Annie demanded.

"No, dear, you get in here with mother."

"Aw! . . . I want to ride up front. . . . Can't I ride up front with you, Ruthie?"

"No, Annie. You know I can't drive with three up here."

"Aw, you've done it lots of times. . . ."

"Annie, you get in here with mother!"

Annie surrendered, whimpering, to the parental imperative, just as the Doc emerged.

"Hey there!" he exclaimed. "Aren't you going to let me sit up front and improve your driving, Ruthie? Aren't you my girl any more?"

That was like him, the old pest. He al-

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ways saw how things were and made some kind of joke out of them. But Wilbur of course took him seriously and started to climb out blushing. . . .

"Don't you budge, Mr. Fadden," she told him. "I won't have that old thing up here criticizing my driving." She put an end to arguments by starting the car. . . .

Through town she went slowly hoping to meet people. They stopped in front of a drugstore while the Doc went in to buy cigars. Mrs. Nooney and the twins drove past and she flashed them a sweet, triumphant smile. If the twins didn't get to meet Wilbur it would be a blow to Mrs. Nooney and it was one Ruth earnestly hoped she would feel. What an earful the old lady would give him if she ever got hold of him! And Mrs. Nooney was the kind that could tell anyone anything in such a nice way. . . . A twinge of fear went through her. Instinctively she speeded up as they crossed the tracks and mounted the long slope from the valley.

The town ended suddenly at the crest of

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low hills which drew a sharp line between cultivated valley and barren upland. Between it and blue mountains lay twenty miles of desert, riven deep by waters the mountains flung down in rare and violent torrents. Men had been trying for half a century to conquer this bit of desert. They had tried damming the waters up in the mountains but the sudden anger of storms always swept the dams away. They had sunk wells, seeking deep hidden streams, but the waters were too far down. . . .

Now it was time to talk, she knew, but she couldn't think of a thing to say. She was uncomfortably aware of him there beside her, and she knew he was feeling the strain of embarrassed silence even more and was even less capable of breaking it. . . . She threw back her head and took a deep breath like an orator preparing for a great effort.

"Isn't this fine?" she demanded aggressively. "Don't you love it out here? . . . In the West, I mean? People that come out from the East nearly always do. It's so much

bigger and freer . . . and . . . well . . . more unconventional. . . .”

It was a line she often took with Easterners when small talk was in order and she had always considered it a good one. It was associated in her mind with a number of well-worn phrases—out where the West begins, great open spaces, where men are men. It usually led to polite conversation about scenery and literature—the Grand Canyon and Zane Grey—and it could also be made to convey, when that was desirable, a subtle implication that you weren’t so slow. It was nearly always a reliable opening in a conversational pinch.

Wilbur made no answer for about half a minute. She thought at first he must have been struck dumb but it appeared he was merely weighing his words. He took her remarks as a proposition which deserved to be considered on its merits.

“Well, there’s more room out here,” he conceded at last. “I like the mountains and they *do* give you a kind of a feeling as though

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life might be different. But I can't see that it is. People are just the same everywhere I've ever been and it's people that count."

This simple exercise in good sense silenced her completely. What he said was true enough. She didn't believe there was any place on earth where people were any worse than in her own home town. That West you read about certainly had nothing to do with the real one. Where men are men . . . like Conny Billop and Walt Gibby . . . piffle! She felt a mixture of respect and irritation toward him. Here she was trying desperately to make conversation and he killed it before it got started with the disconcerting and unanswerable truth.

The car hit a chuck hole, they bounced up in the air and come down closer together, leg touching leg. The contact, slight as it was, gave her a curious, unexpected thrill. . . . To steady himself he started to put his arm along the back of the seat behind her, then withdrew it again.

"That's all right," she ventured with a

little laugh. "If you don't hold on to something you're likely to bounce right out of the car. These roads are awful. They never do anything to improve them."

Gently she let herself slide up against him harder and firmer. And he stood his ground, he didn't give an inch. She wondered if he were as much aware of the contact as she. And as though in answer to her unspoken query she felt a tremor run along his arm. She slid lower in her seat, wedged herself more and more into the angle of his embrace. Nothing more was said and conversation seemed as unnecessary now as it had been imperative at first. Both of them were wholly absorbed in the stirring sense of their propinquity. Slowly she turned, dared to smile at him. . . . But before their eyes could meet the almost forgotten car took a rut and left the road with two wheels, pitching and bumping over tussocks of grass and greasewood. A confusion of protesting voices arose from the rear seat which got the worst of the jolting.

"Hey there! Keep your mind on your

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work, young lady!" the Doc roared. "Don't forget that we're behind you!"

Mrs. Bruck had dived at the lunch basket with a steady hand.

"I heard something break, I'm almost sure," she mourned. "I hope it wasn't the mayonnaise."

"'Scuse me, people," Ruth called cheerily. She had the car back in the road with a deft twist.

"If you youngsters can't behave I'll come up there and chaperon you," the Doc threatened.

This crude remark struck Wilbur like a blow on the side of the head. He fell far back into his own corner of the seat, blushing furiously, and stayed beyond her reach for a long time.

The mountains were a tilted block that showed the town a steep and seamy front five thousand feet high, but fell back the other way in a long easy slope, bearing tall timber on its back and feeding a stream that never went dry. Pass Canyon clove it in the mid-

dle and made a way through to the plains beyond. The summit of the range had been, until a few years before, a place reached only by hard climbing on foot, but now a government road wound round and zigzagged up the back slope to within a mile of rim-rock. Picnickers scattered pickle bottles and paper bags where once only an occasional hunter found access. Blatant flivvers loaded with giggling girls and smart young fellows in straw hats could make a trip in half an hour that would once have taken a good man all day. . . . Mountains that had been mystery and danger to one generation were a toy to the next. Pioneers had approached mountains with prayer, tightening their belts for want and effort, and their children flew up them and over them, spooned and feasted on their austere heights, found nothing there to harden body or spirit. . . . Mountains were no longer barrier nor adventure but they kept a certain dignity. The conquering town chucked them under the chin, threw trash in their faces, used them for playthings—but it

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could not use them for anything else. It could not plough them nor buy and sell them. Every winter deep snows wrapped them away from an encroaching world, made them again a wilderness inviolate.

In the mouth of the canyon were little stores and booths selling hot dogs and pop and people lunching under scattered cottonwoods along a dribbling stream in a boulder-strewn bed. Willow Spring Pavilion, the town's most refined amusement place, was a large unpainted thing like a wide low barn sitting back among cottonwoods. Drinks could be bought discreetly outside in cars but within decorum was preserved and the best people came for chicken dinners and to dance.

"We'll stop here on the way back if everybody isn't too tired," she told him, glad of something to talk about again. "You dance, don't you, Mr. Fadden?"

"Yes . . . I like to."

Thank God for that, she thought.

"I'm a dub at everything else," he added,

moving timidly toward confidence. "I mean, in the social way. When I was a kid I never got out enough. They kept me at home and I didn't have any brothers or sisters—nothing but a lot of aunts—and I wasn't very well, so I didn't get to play much. But they did send me to dancing-school. I could dance almost as soon as I could read. . . ."

He got it out hard. Without looking at him she knew by the tone of his voice he was blushing again. He wanted to explain himself—why he was such a booby. She understood. She sympathized. He wanted to come out of it and didn't know how. She liked him better and better. He was so simple and honest-to-God. She felt warmth for him welling up inside of her. She wished she could think of something to say but what could you say to a speech like that? Words she couldn't find but on a sharp curve she let herself slide up against him again. She dropped her hand as though accidentally on his and gave it an almost imperceptible squeeze before she took it away. She turned

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and smiled at him and for half a second their eyes met in a dawn of understanding.

The mountain had shouldered them into higher, wilder places. No more houses appeared but only the road wriggling deftly up the best way. Scrubby juniper, cactus and oak gave way to tall pines with straight red boles lifting green crests that gave a voice to the wind. Now and then they emerged on points that showed them a hundred miles of purple country.

"Isn't it lovely?" said Alma.

"Yes, and so nice and cool," Mrs. Bruck was timidly appreciative. "If one could only live up here!"

"You'd be up to your neck in snow seven months of the year," grumbled Doc Jagers. "That's the trouble with this country—wherever it isn't too hot it's too cold. . . ."

The climate was a sacred cow in local conversation but the Doc was allowed to mistreat it as he did everything else. It was tacitly conceded that he had some right to be a grouch. He would never be wholly well and

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never be able to go back East to his career. He was the best T.B. specialist in town and worth a lot to it. Although he was dying by inches and had been for ten years, he worked with every bit of energy he had. He knocked the town and everything in it but the town took off its hat to him. He scolded the Rotary Club and got away with it. He laughed at the anti-vice campaign of the Women's Club and still lived. He laughed at almost everything, a little bitterly. He understood what everyone was up to and made fun of it. But no one much resented him because he did not really much care what anyone did. He carried no grudges. From the tense struggle for love and money he seemed to hold aloof. A dying man needs neither. All he wanted was a chance to laugh.

The road ended just where the spruce timber of high altitude began to displace the pine and scrub-oak of the lower slopes. A sign designated this a camping-place and another pointed the way to a spring but the

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place was well marked without these as a stamping-ground for human herds with bottles, tin cans and Sunday newspapers. A great blue spruce that had served thousands as sunshade and umbrella had every limb hacked off as high as a man could reach and white-stemmed aspens were heavily branded with dates, initials and arrow-riven hearts.

Under the trees they unloaded rugs, Navajo blankets, coats and mackintoshes, heavily upholstering the dangerous and unclean earth.

"The ground is so damp," Mrs. Bruck explained. "Even when it doesn't show it. You can't be too careful. . . ."

"I'm not so much afraid of dampness," said Alma, examining the terrain minutely. "But I hate ants. . . . They crawl right up your arms. . . ."

"Not to mention your legs," said Doc Jagers. "And they've got a black ant up here that's almost big enough to shoot with a shotgun. You don't see 'em now but just wait till you get some crumbs scattered

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around. . . . One Sunday I came to this same place with Charley Gobel and a few other fellows from the Elks Club. Every time we came to a good view on the way up we'd stop the car and have a drink. Then we had a big lunch right here. Charley was a little excited and got himself kind of smeared up with strawberry jam and then went and lay down under a tree to take a snooze. The rest of us were having a game of seven-up, when all of a sudden we heard a bellow out of Charley and saw him go smashing off through the brush, waving his arms like a wild man. We didn't know whether he'd seen a bear or gone cuckoo or what. . . . Anyway, we ran him down and he was just alive with these big black ants I'm telling you about. They were biting him in about fourteen places at once and mostly places he couldn't get at on short notice. We had to undress him and dip him in the creek. He said he dreamed he had died and gone to hell and was rolling on coals of fire. . . ."

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"Doc! Must you tell things like that?" Alma protested. "I imagine I can feel them crawling on me now. . . ."

"Don't let him scare you, Alma," Ruth counselled. "I don't believe a word he says. Those ants hardly ever bite. I've let them crawl all over me. . . ."

"Gosh! I wish I was an ant," the Doc languished.

She shook a finger at him.

"Don't be vulgar, Doc," she cautioned sweetly. "You're enough of a nuisance without that."

Wilbur stood silent and ill at ease with his hands behind him, obviously not knowing what to do or say. Alma, who generally assumed a certain command wherever she was, mercifully thrust a folding canvas bucket into his hands.

"Run down to the spring and get some water, will you please, Mr. Fadden? . . . Right down that path where you see the sign. Doc, you build a fire so we can make coffee and Ruth and I will unpack the lunch. . . ."

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No, don't you budge, Mrs. Bruck. Ruth and I will do it."

Out of a huge refrigerator basket emerged intricate trophies of Mrs. Bruck's housewifely skill. When just the family went for a picnic the lunch was likely to be simple but this was the kind of an occasion that called forth all her resources. There were chopped ham sandwiches and cream cheese and jelly sandwiches and sandwiches of crisped bacon and lettuce. Tomatoes were packed in one preserving-jar and mayonnaise in another. Hard-boiled eggs had been tediously transformed into devilled eggs, their yolks mashed up with sundry other ingredients and the whole put together again with toothpicks. There were oranges, peaches and plums and a huge home-made chocolate cake that revealed to the knife a filling half an inch thick. Pickles and stuffed olives had to be coaxed out of their bottles and there were sausages to be toasted over the fire and deluged in mustard.

"Um—m—m—m! Look what's coming!"

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the Doc gloated. "Mrs. Bruck, any time you're having a picnic you can count on me for one. . . . And I don't care where we go, either."

"It's a perfectly wonderful lunch," said Alma. "And enough for a regiment. . . ."

Mrs. Bruck beamed and shrugged. This was the high point of the day for her.

"We got it up on such short notice," she lied timidly. "I just had to use whatever was in the house. . . ."

When they were seated they all at once noticed that Annie was missing. Terror dawned in Mrs. Bruck's eyes and she lifted her voice in a plaintive bleat.

"Annneee!"

"Here I am, Ma!" She was peering down at them from the top of a large round boulder that crowned a buttress of granite some fifty feet high. Her grin was wide with triumph. She had the eyes of them all at last.

"My dear child! Come down from there at once. . . . No, be careful! You'll fall. . . . Do help her, Doctor!"

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Annie reversed and started to slide down backwards on her stomach but her dress caught on the rough surface of the rock so that all she achieved was a display of dry goods and thin little legs.

"Ma . . . I'm stuck!" she wailed.

"Wait, dear . . . be careful. . . . The Doctor will help you." Mrs. Bruck was on her feet while the Doc was hard at the ascent. He finally reached the foot of Annie's inglorious pedestal and got her by the ankle.

"Come on," he urged. "I'll catch you."

"I'm scared!" she wailed, tears in her voice.

"No, you're not," the Doc contradicted. He pulled gently but firmly until all holds were broken and she slid into his arms, relieved and delighted.

Tranquillity established once more, Ruth appointed herself hostess and went about serving everybody with a sample of everything collected on paper plates.

"No, don't you budge, Alma!" she cooed. "I'm going to help everybody." And she felt just that way, full of tenderness, yearning to

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bestow herself somehow on everyone, knowing that she looked her best and that everyone was aware of her. She was the heart of the group and a warm eager heart, pulsing out to every part of it.

Conversation gave way for a while to a vigorous sound of chewing, all of them trying desperately to think of something to say but wholly unable to get their minds away from the engrossing ecstasy of the first eager bites. A few sincere tributes to the lunch were all they achieved.

Wilbur seemed for the first time an integral part of the group for he had an excellent appetite and ate with enthusiasm.

The Doc, as soon as he had taken the edge off his hunger, was up to his old tricks. He suddenly pointed a solemn finger at Ruth.

"Are you eating that ham sandwich I put on that plate?" he demanded.

"I am," she replied. "And if you wanted it, you got left."

"I didn't want it. . . . I just now saw a big black ant crawl into it. That's why I asked."

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Ruth put on a convincingly dumbfounded expression and laid a hand prettily on the vicinity of her stomach.

"Horrors! You didn't!"

"I sure did," said the Doc. "Can't you taste him?"

"Of course, I can imagine I do now . . . I can imagine I'm poisoned. . . . I think you're mean!"

Wilbur came to her rescue, drawing all eyes by his sudden emergence from silence.

"Don't let it bother you, Miss Bruck," he consoled. "There's nothing in an ant to hurt you. . . . Nothing but a little proteid and acid. . . . No toxic substance whatever. . . . Honestly!"

They all tittered except the Doc, who roared and slapped his leg.

"That's good! Have another ant, Ruthie. They're good for you. Wouldn't you like an ant sandwich? . . ."

Wilbur blushed, a look of confusion came over his face and then dissolved into a half-sheepish grin.

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When they had finished everything but tin cups full of coffee, they suddenly noticed a large cur dog of wolfish build and ear with starved ribs showing through a ragged coat, sitting on his haunches not ten feet away.

"Good gracious!" Mrs. Bruck exclaimed. "Where did that ugly brute come from? I never noticed him before and there isn't a house within miles."

The dog had indeed almost the effect of an apparition—a spectre of savage want at their banquet. He was squatted directly behind Wilbur.

"Drive him away, will you Mr. Fadden?" Alma requested. "I don't like his looks."

Wilbur rose awkwardly and took a step toward the dog with obvious reluctance. The dog cringed back from him, baring long white fangs and growling deep in its throat. Wilbur hesitated and for a moment they faced each other motionless.

The Doc rose and reached for a rock.

"Wait! I'll fix him! It never does to let a bad dog see you're afraid of him. . . ."

"No, don't hit him, Doc. I can't bear it." Ruth's voice was rich in compassion. "There's no harm in a dog. The poor thing's hungry!"

She picked up the remains of a sandwich and walked up to the dog, holding it out to him.

"Here, pup," she coaxed.

"Ruth! Come away from that brute!" Mrs. Bruck commanded. "How do you know it won't snap at you? And it may have hydrophobia!"

But Ruth continued calmly to solicit the dog and it came toward her cringing and wriggling along the ground and took the morsel neatly out of her fingers. She turned on them with a smile of triumph.

"There's no harm in a dog," she explained. "It was just hungry."

"Well, I'll be darned!" the Doc exclaimed. "You'd make a lion-tamer, Ruthie. I wouldn't put my hand where that brute could get a crack at it."

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"Ruth is awfully good with animals," Mrs. Bruck boasted. "When she was just a little thing she'd go up and pat any dog she saw on the street."

Ruth gathered a plateful of scraps, sat down on the ground and fed them to the dog one by one. Slowly she transformed starving resentment and fear into warm wriggling eagerness. Finally she held the ugly head in her lap, completely subjugated. . . .

Lunch over, the dullness of digestion fell upon most of the party. The Doc and Alma moved to the shade of a smaller tree. He propped her comfortably against it and himself lay down at full length and lit a cigar. His burst of high spirits was definitely over. He was always like that—full of life for an hour or so and then tired for the day. His lean form in repose had a curiously collapsed look as though all the life had been drained out of it suddenly. He and Alma talked intermittently in low tones as do good friends whose intercourse rests easily upon a basis of

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unspoken understandings. They had kept up a friendship for years and everyone knew it was nothing more than that.

Annie had discovered a temporarily absorbing occupation in making a necklace of pine cones. Mrs. Bruck, her vigilant sense of order contending against an overwhelming impulse toward repose, had gathered up all the dishes and implements she could reach from where she sat and then sunk back against the tree with her eyes closed. The pervading torpor was encouraged by the weather. The breeze had dropped and it was warm and still with clouds piling up in the East.

This mood of the moment Ruth did not share but it was a moment she had been waiting for. She jumped to her feet.

"Well, who wants to go to the top?" she challenged.

Wilbur was on his feet at once. He said nothing but he was obviously ready to follow her anywhere. Annie flung away her pine cones and jumped up and down with delight.

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"I do! I do! I do!" she announced.

"No, Annie," Mrs. Bruck checked her. "I don't think you had better. It looks like rain. I really don't think any of us had better go far. I'm sure I couldn't walk a block."

"Me neither," said the Doc. "I wouldn't walk up there now for a thousand dollars. And it's gonna rain sure."

"You people are a lot of dead ones!" Ruth taunted. "Come on, Mr. Fadden. I guess we've got all the pep there is left in this party. . . ."

"Ruth simply never gets tired," Mrs. Bruck explained. "She wants to keep going all day and all night."

Alma, to Ruth's distress and surprise, got to her feet after a moment of visible hesitation.

"I wouldn't mind a little walk," she said. "But I don't think we'll get far before it rains. . . ."

"Well . . . come on . . . everybody that's going!" Her voice was not quite as sweet as

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she meant it to be. She started up the trail that led to the summit, Wilbur and the dog close beside her, Alma making a bad and unwelcome third and Annie trailing in the rear despite the parental negative.

Ruth turned on her crossly.

"Annie, you know mother told you not to come. Now you go right back!"

"I won't!" Annie was defiant, now that she was out of sight of her mother, who was behind the tree and half asleep.

Ruth turned and walked rapidly, with her two faithful followers keeping pace and Alma falling steadily behind.

"Don't go so fast!" she called once, but no one paid any attention to her.

Presently thunder rumbled a long way off.

"Now, Annie, you've simply got to go back," Ruth was firm. "You'll get drenched!"

"I don't care. . . . I won't get any wetter than you will," Annie argued. But she was not quite so brave as at first. She was afraid of storms. When it thundered again, much

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nearer, she stopped and began picking wild flowers beside the trail. At the third peal Ruth turned and saw with relief that she was scurrying for cover.

Alma's voice came from behind a bend.

"Ruth! Come on back. . . . It's going to rain, child. . . ."

She turned to Wilbur who had followed her close and silent as a shadow.

"I don't believe it's going to rain, do you?" she demanded.

"Well . . . I don't know. . . ." He turned and scrutinized the sky which was about the colour of an old stove. Thunder boomed again and jagged red lightning showed through trees.

"Let's go on anyway!" she proposed. "Who cares for a little rain? Let's go clear to the top no matter what happens!"

Her eyes were on him in painful suspense. He threw back his head and took a deep breath. A prophetic breeze, coming straight from storm, stirred his rumpled blond hair. Standing there staring into a black sky, he

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looked bigger, more self-sufficient than ever before to her. . . .

"Sure," he said quietly. "I'd like to. I always liked storms. They're kind of stimulating. . . . Ozone, you know. . . ."

As they toiled on up the trail the storm seemed to hesitate as to which way it would go. Thunder retreated a little and there was no more lightning. They walked in silence, Wilbur with long easy strides, his eyes on the ground. Now and then he stooped, picked up a rock and threw it with an elaborate assumption of being absorbed in his aim.

It was just the same as in the car. They were so intensely conscious of themselves and of each other that they couldn't talk. He was too shy and she was too keenly aware of his shyness. He pretended almost to ignore her and yet she knew she was as sharply present to him as though she had been a pebble in his shoe. She was deliciously conscious of power over him all the time and yet she didn't know how to use it. . . . It was ab-

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surd. Here they were toiling up a mountain in the face of a storm, running away from others just to be alone and both of them knew it. Yet neither by word nor touch could they reach each other. They had escaped the group but an unseen chaperon held them still apart.

In sidelong glances she studied him and tried to make up her mind about him. He was already to her a wholly different being from the lay figure in her bright dreams he had been that morning. Without trying he had broken down the cool calculating detachment with which she had started the day. Without approaching her he had come closer than she had intended. And yet he remained ridiculous. His shyness was ridiculous. And so was his mouth. He seemed to have the eyes of a man but the mouth of a child. His mouth was too soft. . . .

They came to a place in the trail where a ledge of granite made a sharp step two feet high. He took it in a stride but she stalled with a comic groan and when he turned,

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reached a hand for help. He seized it and yanked her up with too much energy so that she fell against him. He might have had her in his arms almost by accident, but he didn't lift a finger. They stood looking at each other, so close together she could feel his breath. She could see colour mount in his face. She smiled at him her slow full-lipped challenging smile and then looked down. . . . His knees were shaking visibly.

As he turned away he picked up a rock and threw it at a tree with savage force.

They were high up now in the zone where spruce and aspen struggled in dense ranks for possession of the rich black soil the mountain lifted up to catch abundant rain and snow. Spruce grew so close that only splinters of sunlight reached the ground and windrows of white dead trees fallen in battle covered it. Where lightning-born fire had swept away this dark forest, swift-growing aspen with white trunks and green and silver leaves had replaced it, making lanes and plots of sunny loveliness where red and blue wild flowers

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grew and wood-thrushes sprinkled wandering notes of melody.

They stopped to get their breath in one of these. Clouds had parted for a moment, letting sun through.

"Isn't it lovely?" she said.

"I never saw anything like it," he said, speaking very quietly. "It's wonderful. . . . You feel as though you ought to talk in a whisper, don't you?"

She nodded, delighted. That was just the way it made you feel—something you couldn't express.

It was as though the mountain had been asserting itself more and more as they came higher, throwing its spell upon them, until here it conquered them—their young obtuseness and self-absorption. It made them lose themselves for a moment in its beauty, pulled them unconsciously together in a mood of wonder.

They went on slowly, not talking but not needing talk so much as before. The clouds presently closed again and the spruce forest

seemed menacingly dark. Wind came rushing through branches and fallen trees leaning against living ones uttered the loud resinous groans which are always the voice of ever-green forest in storm. Lightning flashed and right before them stood a great stub of a blue spruce which had been splintered and riven to the earth by some bolt of long ago.

The wood which had seemed such a friendly and beautiful place a moment before was now a menacing one. Suddenly she felt a thrill of fear, unreasoning, looked about, wishing there were a house, a tent even—any man-made thing for shelter. The dog which followed them still, was frightened too. It cringed and whined.

"Maybe we better go back," she said, hesitating. "Maybe we better run for it. . . ."

He smiled at her for the first time. For the first time he had an advantage. He was not frightened at all. She could see that. He was timid about many things but storms were not among them.

"All right," he said. "But I think it's too

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late. . . . We'll get just as wet one way as the other. . . ."

She was not going to be more afraid than he was—not if she died for it.

She laughed, a little shakily.

"All right, then. We'll go on. . . ."

She started resolutely up the mountain. Thunder crashed and lightning flared right before them so that they seemed to be charging some awful foe in full action. Wind rushed down the mountain, suddenly chilling them, almost throwing them together. She seized both of his arms in her hands, clutching them tightly, and there was no coquetry in the gesture. The first big drops, running before the storm, pelted through her thin blouse and chilled her skin.

He was surveying the scene coolly.

"That big tree up the hill there," he decided. "Let's make a run for it."

A wide spruce with a great rock directly to windward promised almost perfect protection. They started up the slope, scrambling desperately. It was slippery with a coat of fallen

needles. They tumbled and got up again, laughing and panting, fear forgotten in the delight of sudden action. It had become a game to get to the tree before the full force of storm struck them. In this sudden play they were together at last. They had outrun for a moment all that held them apart.

When they had almost reached the tree she stumbled, he tried to catch her and they fell together in a tangle of arms and legs, shaken and helpless with laughter.

The laughter died, conquered by the shock of their contact as he got to his feet and lifted her, released her with reluctant hands. They stood facing each other, forgetting the weather, breathless with a sense of crisis. Rain broke over them full force, drenching them. It plastered her thin blouse to her body. In effect it stripped her to the waist before him, so that her bold and pointed young breasts leapt out at him like a challenge. His eyes wide and bewildered before this revelation, he reached out wet hesitating hands, touched her, held her, drew her to-

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ward him and covered her lifted face with wet unskilful kisses.

They forgot all about their resolution to go to the top. They had reached the goal for which they really had started. When the brief hard rain was over they started back down the mountain, a bedraggled but undaunted pair. It was cool now, almost cold, with a steady wind blowing.

They went down the slope in long easy strides. Their feet seemed to be running away with them. They looked at each other and laughed. Every few yards he seized her in his arms again and kissed her and his kisses became always more confident and dominating. They found her lips, bit deeper and lasted longer. . . . Something he wanted to say and at last he blurted it out.

"O Ruth . . . I suppose you'll think I'm an awful boob, but I want to tell you . . . I never kissed a girl before . . . I never knew kisses could be like that. . . ."

She didn't laugh, didn't feel like laughing. She wanted to make up to him for all the long

time he had gone unknissed. She threw her arms about his neck, pulled his head down hard to her lips, pressed her body against his. . . . Then pushed him suddenly away. . . .

"We must hurry," she said. "They'll be awfully sore at us for staying away so long."

To get warm they ran down the path.

"Please don't look at me," she begged. "I'm such a mess."

"You're not. You're wonderful. . . ."

She stopped and fished out her vanity case, studied herself in the little round mirror as she powdered her nose. She didn't look so badly, considering. . . . The wind was drying her light fluffy hair and her face was flushed prettily.

Rain was over. Sunlight was silver on wet aspen leaves and birds were singing. Going through an open glade they heard a smash of brush and a bounding thump, turned to see a great grey deer with wide antlers in the velvet bounce high four times and disappear.

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It seemed to fly with invisible wings, touching the ground in play. It seemed the very spirit of the place, swift, beautiful and shy—the spirit of the mountain made visible in a fleeting glimpse, perfect as music in form and movement.

They watched it out of sight and turned to look at each other with wonder-widened eyes as though they had seen something supernatural.

“Wasn’t it beautiful?” she said softly.

He stood looking at the forest that had swallowed it, nodding slowly. Then he turned to her.

“You’re like that,” he told her solemnly.
“. . . Perfect!”

“You big foolish!” She kissed him swiftly and hurried on. Mixed feelings churned around inside of her so that she wanted to run from them.

They came in sight of the car suddenly. Neither of them had realized that they were so near it. They hesitated, traded glances

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which said they wished they were alone again. It was too late.

"There you are!" the Doc sang out from behind the side curtains. "We were just about to get out a search-warrant for you. . . . We've been sitting in this bus an hour, freezing to death."

"Well," she explained lamely, "it started to rain and we had to get under a tree."

The Doc poked out an observing and sardonic face.

"You must have picked a poor tree," he remarked.

"O Ruth," Mrs. Bruck wailed. "You're all wet, dear. . . . You'll take cold. . . . I told you not to go. . . ."

"No, honestly, Mother, I'm almost dry again. I'm not a bit cold. . . ."

"Well," Alma observed, "we certainly can't stop at the Springs now."

"Oh, yes," Ruth protested. "Please! We want to dance. We can go home and change first. It only takes twenty minutes. Please,

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Alma, we want to dance, don't we, Mr. Fadden?"

For the first time he asserted himself and she joined him.

"We want to dance!" they chorused.

CHAPTER SIX



Y seven o'clock the town already shone, moved and murmured with a quickened life.

Shuffling crowds on the sidewalks thickened and slowed, hindered by many contacts of voices, hands and eyes. No one could hurry but anyone who moved leisurely and receptive could feel warm currents of crowd being.

Motors purred and snorted and met in a dance of light at Third and Center, making of the lone traffic cop a bright hero of frenzied command.

Stores glared at rivals across the way with every light they had. Barber shops, trying to close, were held open by long rows of men, staring at bathing beauties in the *Police Gazette*, waiting frowzy and impatient to be made sleek, beautiful and sweet to smell.

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In lunch-rooms Mexican track-workers with huge sombreros and lanky sunburnt fellows off the cattle ranges and the dry-farms wolfed pies and sandwiches and chased them with noisy cataracts of coffee.

The Salvation Army on a corner jazzed a hymn and stopped one in a hundred to hear why Jesus died.

Girls, dressed and powdered for conquest, smiled and giggled as they went by in tight-linked pairs and trios. Men with polished shoes and barbered faces stood on corners, told each other stories, threw back their heads and laughed loud.

For this is Saturday night, the night of money, love and liquor.

A quarter of a million dollars have this day been paid into ten thousand pockets and much of it will move again before the night is over.

Money is the blood of the town and this is the night it jumps.

To-morrow the town will lie pale and tired and rise late to sing the praise of God but

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to-night it is flush and happy and belongs to the devil. More things will happen to-night than in all the week beside.

To-night the town will dance at seven public dances of assorted social grade, from the one in Dogtown where sheep-herders and mechanics, cowboys and brakemen, greaser and gringo, hunk and wop, will meet, get full of corn, and fight with brass knucks, quirts, monkey wrenches and pocket knives over soft-eyed girls from Old Town, to the one at Willow Springs where sons and daughters of first families will neck and drink discreetly in limousines between fox-trots. No one will lack a girl if he has a dollar and sticks to his own gang.

To-night the town will drink and everyone who wants shall have his liquor. At the Center Street Barber Shop he can get what looks and tastes like pre-war Scotch, but isn't, for ten dollars a quart, and at the Crossroads Garage he can get white mule and native grape brandy for half the price, and it will

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lift him just as high and let him down no harder.

To-night the town will gamble. Fifty poker games are starting now and they range from penny-ante, with wives sitting in, to the stern and silent all-night contest with a ten-dollar limit in a back room at the Elks Club. Behind a locked door over the Gold Star pool-room a crap game rattles and clinks, curses and prays in a circle of sweating faces round a pile of silver and bills. . . . Elderly bridge addicts glare at each other across the dummy in homes deserted by the young.

To-night the town will make love. It has a thousand dates. Soon after dark it will throw off flying cars in all directions, like yellow sparks from a pin-wheel, all seeking to bury themselves in the purple night, looking for dark quiet places to park with lights out and curtains drawn.

Cars are privacy and escape. Cars run away from home and mother, wife and neighbour, make the world fifty miles wider and

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easier to hide in. Cars carry young lovers, bathed and powdered, with eager lips and curious fingers, stealthy married men with cuties cuddled beside them, young bucks with shopgirls and waitresses swiftly picked up on Second Street. . . . Cars loaded with desire vanish as points of burning red into the purple night. . . .

Romer, bathed, shaved and fed, wearing a suit newly pressed and a black and red necktie, with a large cigar voluptuous between his teeth, strolled down Center Street, receptive, serene. He would plunge into the current of Saturday night as he had into the river. He too would rush away in a humming car, drink fiery toasts to liberty and crime, shake a foot with a pretty girl. . . . He shouldn't but he would. He had lain in the sunlight and absorbed energy, now he would play in the moonlight and spend it.

At the corner of Third and Center was a lamp-post where questing and idle males for-gathered in the evening, without appoint-

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ment, but communal understanding. There soon or late you would meet everyone who had time and taste for adventure. There poker games and parties were planned, stories told, the lore and gossip of women passed current. If no one was there, someone would presently come along.

The lamp-post this evening already supported the long and languid figure of young Conrad Billop, known affectionately as Conny and derisively, in reference to his gift of romantic narrative, as Bullcon. He was six feet of weedy sudden growth in ice-cream trousers and blue serge, with a heavy chip-straw pushed back from a blue-black shiny pompadour, eloquent of vaseline and effort. His heavy black hair and high cheek-bones, Romer knew, were traceable to the fact that his pioneering grandfather, after the fashion of his time, had married a Mexican.

Limp he hung against the lamp-post like a wind-blown rag, and limp a cigarette dangled from his lips. It was a limpness not of exhaustion but of hopeful receptivity. He

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was an empty vessel waiting to be filled, and excitement was what could fill him. He lived only in action and between times he relaxed.

Conny was Romer's favourite of all the town boys who forgathered here, because Conny was a failure, beautiful, perfect and complete, while most of the others were only ragged and unfinished successes. Then too, Conny like Romer was a man of leisure and they naturally came together in search of diversion. Moreover, Conny had a genuine gift of self-revelation. He was a teller of magnificent lies and unexpected truths. He was rich in experience. In a short life he had been expelled out of two schools and had flunked out of a third. He had lost four jobs in three years and had left home for ever twice. He had loved and lost several times, had been in jail once and frequently drunk. He had a good-humoured and tolerant attitude toward all things save the town and Woman. The town he regarded as a thing that cramped his spirit and cut him off

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from a glorious destiny. Woman he considered unspeakably disappointing, failing alike to fulfil the ideal of man and his desire.

All of this Romer had learned in much detail before but he found philosophical discussion with Conny invariably stimulating, especially over a drink.

They exchanged greetings and Romer braced the other side of the lamp-post.

"What's doing?" he queried.

"Not a thing. . . . Same as always," Conny answered. "This town's a dead one. Y'know what? . . . I think I'm gonna blow pretty soon."

"Yes?" Romer encouraged.

"Yeah. . . . Y'know what I'm gonna do when I get away from this dump?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Come back."

"Come back hell! What'll I come back for?"

"Well, if you make money you'll come back

to show it to 'em, and if you don't you'll have to come back."

Conny pondered this logic awhile. Then he came back with a powerful answer.

"Less go get a drink!" he proposed. His imagination fed on the idea. "We'll run out to River Hall and get a little oiled and then we'll go out to Willow Springs and hit the respectable shindig just about the time it's going good. . . . I've got the car for the night. . . . Come on!" He threw away his cigarette. He was bright-eyed and tense.

In the car Conny was a master. He threaded traffic with an inch-wise skill, nosing easily ahead of less gifted drivers. His hand was light on the wheel and his toe was quick on the gas. Almost he made the car seem supple like a living thing.

He roared through unpaved Dogtown where dust made luminous nebulae about infrequent street lamps and the spotlight picked out grotesque figures of startled hurry as he squawked his horn. Forty horse-power did

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his bidding and the world jumped out of his way. The little light on the board showed his face confident, joyful and absorbed.

Once he had run away three hundred miles in the car, throwing his mother into hysterics and his father into rage, and the only explanation he ever gave was that he could not bring himself to stop until the gas gave out.

Up the valley they blazed a glaring trail through black night. Trees and fences ran by quick and vivid, now on this side, now on that. Thirty, thirty-five, forty, the speedometer counted. Conny threw off his hat and settled low in his seat. "Keep your eye peeled for that motorcycle cop," he ordered. Forty, forty-five, counted the moving tape. Cars coming were tiny points of light that swelled suddenly, beautifully into twin blinding suns and were gone in a roar and a flash of passing faces. Cars ahead were red dots hunted and killed by the spotlight, hounded with the horn in full cry. Most fell away easily but one fought for the road and this gave joy. Conny hung to its trail with his

front bumper all but nudging its rear mud-guard and bawled his challenge on the horn. A coming car flashed round a curve, threatening awful threefold collision. Quick on the foot-brake he fell back, then leapt forward again, leapt alongside. Fifty, fifty-five, counted the tape, while they raced. Teeth shining in a grin of ferocious triumph, Conny nosed ahead and hogged the road, throwing his beaten rival the dust and smoke of his scorn.

Lights and the powerful voice of a mechanical piano came from a building low and black among trees. Motor barely purring Conny crept up to it, cautious, alert. "We'll take a squint through the window," he said. "I don't think anybody'll be there yet. . . . Too early. We'll get a couple of highballs and beat it. Don't pay to come here late. You're likely to meet anybody, especially on Saturday night. It's about due to be raided, too. They say old man Connover has it raided regular once every three months to keep the Woman's Club and the preachers

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quiet. Starts right up again. He couldn't carry this precinct without it."

He reconnoitred through a crack in a shutter.

"All clear," he reported. "Not a soul in sight. They just play that pan to show they're open for business."

Around a dance floor tables hid, each behind its own partition. The whole interior was painted white and hung with long drooping festoons of pink, white and blue paper. The mechanical piano at one end of the room filled it with a tremor of jazz. Conny turned off the piano and coughed. Emerged from a side door a short fat man, bald, sclerotic, professionally cordial.

"Hello, boys. . . . What'll it be?"

"Couple of ginger-ale highballs, Joe, and put a big kick in 'em, will you? I'm lower 'n a duck's stomach to-night."

"I'll make you one that'll knock you right up among the clouds, m' boy. We got some real old-time stuff to-night, just in from Juarez. Bottled-in-bond, ninety-proof. . . .

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Make a rabbit spit in a bull-dog's eye." He vanished. Conny slumped limp again, empty, waiting.

"All this ninety-proof, bottled-in-bond they make right here," he remarked, cynical. "They say they've got a hundred feet of copper worm laid under a *sakey* to keep it cool. . . . It ain't bad stuff, at that. Jim Cutter and I killed a quart of it last Saturday and it never did us a bit of harm. . . . We crashed into a greaser-wop dance out on Canyon road about midnight, all lit up. I grabbed off a cute little kid and began to dance with her and a big stiff called me. He was going for a gun, it looked like, when I cracked him on the jaw and knocked him cold. Say, maybe we didn't step out o' there. . . ."

The story was interrupted by the arrival of two tall brown glasses. Conny lifted his.

"Here's mud in your eye," he proposed cordially.

"Thanks," said Romer as he lifted his own drink. "By the way, Conny, what are you doing now?"

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"Not a thing since I blew that job at the Greenbaum Wholesale and Trading Company. Moreover, I've got about sixty bucks and I'm not gonna turn a wheel till I'm flat, and maybe not then. . . ."

"What was the matter with that job?" Romer inquired.

"What was the matter with it?" Conny exploded. "You know what I was down there? Assistant shipping clerk! I made out bills of stuff going to little country stores. Four dozen cans Heinz baked beans, two dozen horseshoes, assorted sizes, one case eggs, and so on, forty times a day, from nine in the morning until five in the afternoon. One day was bad, two days were awful, third day I began throwing things at the office cat to keep from going crazy, fourth day I put on my coat about three-thirty and walked out. 'Where you going, young man?' says old Greenbaum. 'I'm going out and get a little fresh air,' I says. 'Your damn store stinks.' And it does, too. It's full o' rotten eggs and green hides. 'You better get back there and

finish those bills first,' he says, kind of sharp. 'You go to hell!' I says, and walked out. That's one satisfaction I've gotten out of this burg. I've told a lot of the big bugs where they get off. . . . The old man gave me hell for quitting down there. He said it was a splendid opening with an A 1 firm. Opening for what? I'd like to know. I wouldn't spend my life in that stink-hole if they gave it to me. Poor old Charlie Warren's been there twenty years. He started on eight dollars a week and now he gets sixty. Meantime he's had four kids. He has to think twice before he blows himself to a five-cent cigar. . . . Christ, what a life!"

Conny drained the last of his drink. His eye was stern, his voice deep with feeling.

"What's more, all the jobs a fellow can get in this town are just like that as far as I can see. I tried it in the old man's place for a while. Paint and varnish, varnish and paint! I can't stand the smell of 'em. They make me sick at the stomach. . . . You've got to start at the bottom and work up, they tell you.

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But where the hell are you when you get to the top? And you've spent your life getting there. . . . Not for me! Y'know what I'm gonna do?"

"You want me to tell you?" Romer asked.

"If you think you can," Conny assented, suspicious.

"You'll marry a nice girl and settle down to a good job and make a pile of money," Romer prophesied.

Conny, not unexpectedly, was outraged. He leaned forward and thumped the table.

"I . . . will . . . like . . . HELL!" he roared. "You make a noise like somebody's grandmother! There ain't any nice girls, for one thing. These nice girls are something you read about. The real ones, when you get 'em around the corner, they're all alike. And when you marry one, you're strapped for life. None in mine. I'm gonna BLOW!"

Exhausted by his own eloquence, he sank back in his seat and lit a cigarette. But silence was difficult for Conny at any time and impossible when he had had a drink.

After a moment of morose inhalation he began again in a minor key on the subject which stood next to his own troubles in his heart.

"Y'know what? You and I and all us young fellows, we hit this country too late for the rich pickings. [The good time was in the old days when my grandfather came. He used to tell me about it by the hour before he died. . . . And since he died I've picked up some more stories about him that maybe he wouldn't have told. He came over the Santa Fe trail in the seventies. Punched bulls in a wagon train. Didn't have a nickel. He got a job with the railroad—they were building it then. He and a fellow named Garnet were professional hunters with a contract to keep the camps in meat. Can you beat that for soft? Hunt all day and get paid for it. And say! there was game in those days. Now we go out on Sundays and a hundred and fifty of us shoot at one poor scared little duck and call it sport. Then there was buffalo. Solid acres and square miles of 'em,

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the old man said. When they ran, the earth shook. The hunters used to ride into a herd, lickety-split, hell-bent, right into the middle of it, and if your horse stumbled, good-bye baby! You'd range alongside an old bull and cut down on him with a forty-five and over he'd go and you were off after another. Ten miles they'd hang with 'em sometimes and then go back to skin and butcher. Cows they killed just for the hump and hams and old bulls for the robes. Whole packs of wolves and coyotes followed 'em to pick up the leavings. . . . When the old man was flush he'd go to Dodge City for a little blow-out. That was a live town! Nearly all bars and dance-halls and everybody wore a gun. It was an off day they didn't kill a man. The old man blew into a dance there one night and got into a row over a woman with a gambler named Sellers. This Sellers was a two-gun man and a terror. He drew on my granddad but he was just a little slow. The old man plugged him and beat it. He never told it on himself, but he killed Sellers all

right, and a good job it was too, I guess. . . . Later on, the old man took up land and bought cattle and made a pile. Once he played seven-up for a thousand head of steers and lost, but that was nothing to him. There was so much stuff lying around loose then, anybody that had guts could get his. And a fellow could get action in those days. There was something doing around here then. But look at the place now! Dead as hell, and everything nailed down and mortgaged twice. . . . Godalmighty, how I wish I'd been here fifty years ago!"

He sat silent a moment, his eyes deep in elegiac meditation.

"Y'know what I got a notion to do?" he queried. "I got a notion to take a few days to it and write up a bunch o' that old-time stuff for the magazines. I got imagination and language, haven't I? I figure I couldn't do any worse than most of what they print . . . all that hug-and-a-kiss stuff. . . . Well, less have another drink."

When it came he raised his glass and

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smiled at Romer, full of mellow good-fellowship.

"May you live to be a hundred," he proposed. "And then get pinched under the Mann Act."

"Thanks," said Romer.

Conny slumped low in his seat, narrowed his eyes and wagged his head in a way that foretold a more intimate mood. Romer knew what was coming. After his second drink Conny almost always took up the subject of women, both in general and in particular.

"Say, I saw our mutual little red-headed friend last Sunday—you know who I mean—with that young Fadden fellow from the East in her car with her. . . ."

Romer knew whom he meant painfully well. Conny had seen him with Ruth Bruck and had tried several times to post him about her in accordance with the well-established conventions and ethics of street-corner gossip, which provide that everything known about a woman shall be told among men in strict confidence and at the right time. Romer gath-

ered that Conny was among Ruth's many one-time flames and that he was eager to welcome a friend to that category.

"They tell me she's just about got him roped and hog-tied," Conny went on. "And he's got a million dollars coming to him. Can you beat that? He's connected with the shoe-polish Faddens. . . . Out here for his health or something. . . . Supposed to be spending the summer out at Bill Allerton's dude ranch but he's in town most of the time and I guess she's the reason. . . ."

Romer squirmed a little, divided between principle and curiosity.

"What sort of fellow is this Fadden?" he inquired.

"One of these nicey-nicey boys," Conny explained. "Too much money and too much mamma. Never hit the trail at all. Needs a nurse. Jim Cutter and Walt Gibby and I had him out in the car one day and Jim started to tell a dirty story. Walt tried to give him the high sign but no use. Well sir, Wilbur blushed like a girl at her first

kissing party. He's really a big piece of beef but you think of him as little because he's so innocent. And who should he fall for but Ruth Bruck, the hard-boiled baby! Say, if he knew what I know about her, I bet it would break his heart. . . ."

Conny leaned forward in growing confidence.

"Dumb-Isaac on this," he warned. "It's just between you and me, but one night . . ."

Romer held up his hand.

"Dumb-Isaac yourself," he suggested.

"Why?" Conny was surprised.

"I might get drunk and spill it," Romer explained.

"Well, all right," Conny assented magnanimously. "God knows I don't believe in talking about the girls except just like between you and me, you know, when it won't go any further. . . . Well, anyway, if little Wilbur ever gets an earful about her it sure will spoil the party she's planned. A nice hand-raised boy like that always thinks a girl is just as good as she looks . . . I know how

it is. I was kind of that way myself for a year or so. . . . They were all music and flowers to me. . . . Until I got to running around with the bunch. That was what wised me up. I'm on to 'em now!" There was a ferocity of young misogyny in his voice. "None of 'em can put anything over on me now and a few of 'em have found it out!"

He was stern, righteous, rattling the ice in his glass.

Suddenly he paused, listening. His senses, Romer had more than once observed, were curiously keen and alert.

"Car outside," he observed. "Better take a squint."

He moved quickly to the window and was back in half a minute, teeth and eyes shining.

"Godalmighty, there's a whole carful out there. I can't see any faces but I can see fat men and a derby. It ain't any of our bunch. Might be the poker party from the Elks and my old man might be in it. They generally come out here to lickerup before they play. . . . Out the back door for us! . . ."

CHAPTER SEVEN



IN the Springs Pavilion chicken dinners were being served to a quiet few at tables terraced round a dance floor while summer dusk fell cool and soft among the trees. The Lightning Harmonizers, armed with piano, fiddles and a saxophone, slaughtered *Sole Mia* to make a waltz. No one danced and they subsided, leaving the hour to crickets and the creek and a little low-voiced conversation from the guests. They would have enough to do later when the Saturday-night crowd began to arrive.

The four, having ordered, sat surveying each other under bright light for the first time since they had parted after the picnic to change clothes. Doc had brought Alma in his car and Ruth and Wilbur had come in hers.

Alma looked her best, Ruth thought, in that

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green thing. Too bad she had worn green because it fought with her own blue, but lucky she looked so well because now she might want to stay. Alma had protested against coming but Ruth knew she had really wanted to come and that she would want to stay if she got enough dances. That was the trouble. She probably wouldn't. Men were so scarce.

The Doc was the weakest point in the organization. He was dead tired and looked it. She was sorry for him but her only thought was how to make him want to stay. She yearned now toward dancing as a hungry man toward food and she could dance all night.

"It was awfully nice of you to come, Doc," she thanked him. "I know you didn't want to and mother wouldn't have let me come without you and Alma. She has a notion this is an awfully wicked place. . . ."

"A little wickedness right now is what I need," the Doc answered. "I think I'll sneak out to the car and get a kick of this fellow's white mule. . . . Won't you ail join me?"

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"Isn't it terrible stuff?" Alma demurred.

"No worse than what we used to get over the bar," the Doc assured her.

Ruth was watching Wilbur. Quiet as ever, he was bright-eyed, and almost natty in a grey suit and a blue necktie. She could see no trace of shock or objection on his face. . . . He looked interested. He certainly was picking up speed as he went along.

"Let's all have one!" she proposed. "I feel awfully devilish!"

The order was conveyed to the waiter in a low voice, together with a half-dollar tip. He nodded gravely, like one receiving news of death. Then they went and sat in the car until four highballs were brought.

"Isn't it ridiculous?" Alma exclaimed. "Why don't they bring it to the table? Everybody knows you can get it."

"Serving it out here is what makes it respectable," the Doc explained. "They serve it at the tables in River Hall and that place is a stench in the nostrils of all good citizens, as the Reverend Warburton says almost every

Sunday. The best people come to this place, so it's got to be different somehow. I remember when I first came to town, so long ago I hate to think about it, this place was a den of vice too. A fellow used to drive out here behind a fast horse in a couple of hours and if he met anyone he knew he pulled his hat down over his eyes. . . . Really nice women wouldn't even look at the place when they passed by. And now, by golly, there's hardly anywhere a man can go, and be sure he won't run into the womenfolks, except to work. . . ."

"Well, why shouldn't it be that way?" Alma demanded. "I don't see why women . . ."

The Doc cut her off with a laugh and a lifted hand.

"If you give me any of that feminist stuff to-night, Alma," he warned, "I'll never buy you another drink as long as I live. . . ."

Wilbur took a tentative gulp of his drink, gagged a little, waited a few minutes and then took a larger and easier one. He settled back in his seat and stretched out his legs.

"It's wonderful," he observed, in a high clear young voice, "how rapidly alcohol permeates the system."

The Doc laughed heartily. He enjoyed Wilbur.

"It sure is," he agreed. "It's rapid stuff. That's why they call this kind greased lightning. . . . Fusel oil and a sudden wallop. . . . Well, let's go back and look for that chicken."

"You look lovely in that blue taffeta," Alma told Ruth when they were seated again. "And so young. . . . Positively, you don't look more than sixteen. . . . But it seems to me it's too low for a night like this. Aren't you afraid you'll take cold?"

"I never take cold," Ruth answered, looking down complacently over her creamy young bosom.

It *was* low, the lowest thing she had, and she would have made it a little lower if that had been possible. She knew her shoulders and neck were good and she knew Wilbur was keenly aware of them. With triumphant

satisfaction she could feel his eyes on her all the time. He hardly looked around at all.

People who came after dinner to dance were beginning to arrive now. Occasional motors rumbled and subsided in the dark and tables filled one by one.

With a twinge she saw Walt Gibby and Eva Niflot come in and take a table directly across the floor from them. In spite of herself she could not keep from watching them out of the corner of her eye. Walt ordered something and then both of them began looking around. . . .

A sure sign, she reflected, that they were beginning to get fed up on each other. And no wonder! Neither of them had had a date with anyone else in a year. Being engaged so long must be an awful bore. And both of them were so jealous. . . . Walt was certainly getting common-looking. There had been something cherubic about him when he was younger but at twenty-two he was already fat and red-faced and his sleek hair brought out the growing weight of his jaw. It was hard

for her to believe she had ever been in love with him. . . . Eva looked awfully pretty though—she admitted it reluctantly—slim and dark with an ivory-white skin. She spent most of her life taking care of her skin—never went out in the sun and never touched water to her face, only cold cream. She knew how to make up her long dark narrow eyes, too. She pencilled her brows but only a woman would ever notice it. The way she looked at a man and then dropped her long dark lashes, you'd think she was full of the devil, but it was a false alarm. She was a careful girl. . . .

Their presence filled Ruth with a vague uneasiness, prodded old wounds, stirred half-conscious recollections of all the times she had known herself the prettiest girl present except for Eva. She knew Eva had something for men she lacked. And Eva had it in for her. If ever she got hold of Wilbur, got a chance to talk to him. . . . "But don't think Ruth isn't a nice sweet girl, because she is. . . ." Well, there was no reason why they should

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meet. . . . But she no longer felt as serenely happy as she had. An alert defensive tension crept into her. . . .

Both of them were looking now. She turned away quickly and began to laugh and talk excitedly about nothing. She was glad they were seeing her with Wilbur—and yet, at the same time, afraid. . . .

The next thing she knew Eva had crossed the floor and was bending over Alma in an effusion of affectionate greeting.

"I haven't seen you for ages, dear. . . . I just had to run over for a minute and say hello. . . . No, I can't sit down. Walt is waiting. Hello, Ruth. You're looking lovely."

They smiled at each other—the gleaming ferocious smiles of long-standing enmity.

"How do you do, Mr. Fadden?" She barely glanced at him as they were introduced, making it perfectly clear that she wasn't at all interested. It was just her dear friend Alma she had come to see. But Wilbur was looking at her and she was standing right in front of him, bending over so that he got a fine

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view. And then she was gone, smiling and graceful, leaving them a faint lilac aroma to remember her by. . . . She did it well. You had to hand her that.

The orchestra played and all four of them rose and fox-trotted.

When Wilbur said he could dance he was right. His long legs, lubricated by a drink, moved in perfect time. He didn't hold her very tightly at first but the farther they went the closer together they came. Soon her red head was right under his chin and a hair could not have come between them. In their contact was something wholly good. . . .

He seemed so different to her at different times. Now it was like when they were alone on the mountain. She felt as though they really understood each other, had discovered something in common. . . .

But people kept coming—people she knew.

Outside, motors roared and pattered and fenced in the dark with long bright blades of light as they turned and backed into parking-spaces. Was the whole town coming to-

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night? She might have known it would, on such a fine cool night and a Saturday night besides. She began to wish they hadn't come, wished they had just gone home together instead. When they had come down from the mountain she had thought only of dancing. Her feet had longed to dance a dance of triumph. She had not thought of people and people made such a difference. Here in a crowd Wilbur wasn't the same and neither was she. He was silent and she was worried.

She wanted to talk to him. She would have liked to warn him against Eva because he would surely dance with Eva now. She would have liked to tell him that Eva was an awful liar and hated her and would knock her if she had a chance. But how could she say that? It would sound so catty. And he, the big innocent, probably thought Eva was just as sweet as she looked. And anyway, it would be hard for Eva to say anything to him. It was awfully hard to talk to him when he danced. He was so far up there and so ab-

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sorbed in his dancing. When he danced he seemed to live in his legs.

There were John Romer and Conny Billop. . . . O Lord! And Conny was visibly lit.

Conny lit was a menace. Yet the sight of him gave her no more pain than did the sight of Romer. Not that Romer would ever say anything to anybody. She knew he wouldn't. He wasn't that kind. But he was a part of the self she wanted to get away from—a peculiarly painful part of what she wanted to forget. She wanted to be now what Wilbur thought she was and to forget everything else she ever had been. She wanted to start all over. . . .

Wilbur left her to propel Alma dutifully about the floor and she and the Doc suffered together—for dance he certainly couldn't. And all the time she was dodging his feet with hers, she was watching Wilbur over his shoulders. She watched Eva angling for him with her eyes, smiling at him—watched him go and ask her for a dance.

And then, to her amazement, she saw Walt

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Gibby coming straight at her. She hadn't danced with him in a year. By common consent they had long avoided each other as much as possible. But now he stood over her, looking down with that smug confident smile of his.

"Well, Ruth. . . . How about it? Just for old time's sake. . . ."

Nerve? He had more of it than anyone she ever knew. For old time's sake she would have liked to smack him on the ear. But she was afraid of him. She rose, smiling up at him sweetly.

"That's awfully nice of you, Walt," she said. "You're looking splendid this evening."

Feed him apple-sauce—that was the idea. Keep him friendly.

"So are you, Ruth. You get prettier every year."

"O Walt!" she laughed. "What have I got that you want?"

Suddenly he put on a solemn voice.

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"Well, you've got a lot that I want, if it comes to that, Ruth. . . ."

She could hardly believe she heard him right. At this late date was he trying to start all over again? She yearned to snub him, but she didn't dare.

"Thanks, Walt."

He said no more till the music stopped, and then, to her further amazement, he tried to lead her through the door, out into the dark. And right under Eva's nose! What was he up to? Was he tired of Eva or was he just trying to make her jealous and get even with her for flirting with Wilbur? . . . or . . .

One thing was certain—she wasn't going. She wasn't going outside the door with anyone but Wilbur.

"Come on. . . . Let's get a little fresh air," he urged when she hung back. She could smell a drink on his breath. Maybe that was what made him so brave.

"No, thanks, Walt. . . . It's too cool. . . . I'd rather stay in if you don't mind."

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Walt was not used to refusals. His hand tightened on her arm.

"Oh, come on, Ruth! . . . You never used to be so slow."

She held back hard.

"And you always used to be so careful!"

She delivered her dig in a voice as cool and smooth as the blade of a knife. She wished immediately she hadn't said it. She could see him wince. For an instant they stood looking into each other's eyes. Hatred as hot as ever their desire had been flared briefly through the cool surface of their politeness. Deliberately, smiling all the time, he dug his fingers hard into her arm so that it hurt—then turned away.

"Excuse me," he said with a smile over his shoulder.

She stood glaring silent rage at his retreating back.

But she had not long to think about him. Too much was happening. Wilbur and Eva dancing together caught and held her eye. They were waltzing beautifully but they

didn't seem to be talking and that was something to be thankful for. Eva was even shorter than she and Wilbur, with his head lifted, made the impression of scarcely knowing she was there.

He was serenely unaware of himself as a centre of interest. Far above the crowd he carried his head full of dreams like a fragile boat riding a choppy sea. His eyes were bright and his lips parted, his hair a little rumpled and his tie a little askew.

He was having the time of his life. She could see that. His one drink was just what he had needed to jar him loose. Most likely it was his first. He was having lots of new experience to-day. . . . She wished he hadn't taken that drink—wished he were awkward and timid again and afraid of everyone but her. She wished she had him out of there and alone somewhere. But it would never do to suggest going home now. There was nothing for it but to see it through. Oh, what a fool she had been to bring him here!

She was in a terrible humour now so that

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she could scarcely keep smiling. And stranded alone on the edge of the floor without a man! That in itself was a painful situation. . . .

She felt a hand on her arm and looked up at John Romer. His eyes were perfectly grave as he held out his arms. They danced.

She hoped he wouldn't say anything to her and above all that he wouldn't try to lead her out the door. She was uncomfortably conscious of his hand on her back. It was easy to forget him when he wasn't there but his touch was disturbing. It had power over her. It wouldn't be easy to break away from his hand as she had from Walt's.

They danced in silence and when the music was over Romer without a word deposited her beside Alma, bowed and went his way. And Wilbur, with his eyes on hers, was threading a torturous route across the floor, coming back to her from dangerous encounters all unspoiled.

But he didn't quite make it. In the middle of the floor he had to pass a group of men—

Archie Platt, Conny Billop, Walt Gibby and some others. They all turned to look at him. She could see by the way they looked they were all interested in him—probably had been talking about him. She knew just what their attitude toward him would be—toward any stranger with money. If he acted the least bit stuck-up they would be down on him hard and if he was nice to them they would want to take him out and get him drunk and fill him full of lies.

With her hands clenched in anxiety she watched and hoped he would pass them by. But of course he didn't. He was opening up like a morning glory. He was a little friend to all the world since he took that drink. . . . Walt Gibby grabbed him and he shook hands all around, laughing and shy. Conny Billop, red and garrulous, began telling a story. A few minutes more and they might all go out together. . . . It would never do. She determined to intervene.

Two modes of approach to a group she had—one coy and apologetic and full of excuse-

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mes, like Eva Niflot, and the other bold and overwhelming.

This was a situation which called for daring. She ran across the floor, took a risky little slide on its waxed surface, and brought up among them, laughing, as though she hadn't known herself just where she was going.

"Why, hello, Archie!" she greeted. "I haven't seen you for a coon's age. Hello, Conny. . . . I never saw anything like the way you men flock together. You might think there wasn't a girl on the floor. I just thought I'd butt in. . . . What are you all talking about so busily, I'd like to know?"

"Well, if you want to know," Walt grinned at her brutally, "we were talking about you."

She smiled at him bravely.

"I trust it was something awfully nice," she said.

Music started. She turned toward Wilbur, relapsing gracefully, triumphantly into his arms, smiling back over her shoulder at her assembled foes as she bore him easily away.

"What did they say about me?" she de-

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manded, laughing. "I'm just dying to know. . . ."

"Not a thing that I heard," he said. "But I wasn't paying much attention. . . ."

Harry Gardini at the piano lifted a voice like an auctioneer's.

"When I'm alone . . . with only dreams of
you . . .

that won't come true . . .

What'll I do? . . . What'll I do?"

As he sang he rolled his body in time to the music, jerked his head so that his long black hair flopped. The whole orchestra swayed with him.

Almost everybody was dancing now. Confetti had been put in circulation and lay like a skimp of parti-coloured snow over the floor and on the hair of women and the shoulders of men. Some of the dancers had donned tall paper fool's-caps that came out of favours at the tables.

The party was getting warm. When the music stopped the clapping for an encore was

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a spontaneous crash with a few shouts and whistles thrown in.

Wilbur clapped as hard as any but before the music began again she laid a hand on his arm.

"Let's go out a little while and sit in the car. . . . Do you mind? . . . I'm getting so warm."

Outside a cool breeze blew, mountains loomed black and huge, sky blazed with the great stars of high country on a clear night. As they emerged from the hall the universe seemed suddenly to spread and shine before them, to grow vast and quiet. It was like coming up into air after a long dive in dark and dangerous waters.

It gave her a feeling of infinite relief to be out of there and away from everyone she knew. She wished they could keep on going alone, never go back at all.

Wilbur stood a moment looking up at the stars. With his chest thrown out and his feet wide-planted he stood and surveyed the night

as though he had made it and was proud of the job.

"Say!" he exclaimed with a thrill of discovery in his voice. "They've got stars in three colours out here—silver, blue and gold—I never noticed that before! And they look three times as big as they do back home. You almost feel as though you could reach up and touch them—don't you? Is that the Little Dipper over there?"

"You can't prove it by me." She laughed. "Where did we leave the car? Oh, yes . . . there it is."

Cars sat in a long irregular line, most of them in deep shadow under trees. Every type was there from a Ford bug to a Packard limousine. Some cars were visibly occupied, women showing as vague light blurs and men as sharp splashes of white shirt front. Burning cigarettes were fiery red eyes in the dark and now and then the flare of a match showed a face, sudden and surprising. From some cars came laughter, high woman-laughter an-

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swering deep man-laughter. Waiters cautiously visited cars with trays and glasses. Some cars had side curtains drawn. There were cars that chatted and cars that murmured and cars heavy with silence. . . . Cars were a part of the party.

Their car was off by itself where a cotton-wood-tree dropped a shadow black as a hole in the ground. The back curtains were still up.

"Let's sit in here," she suggested, opening the back door as he started to open the front. "There's more room."

Little room they seemed to need though. Two could not have sat on less.

Even so he was still and constrained at first, just as though they had never kissed. His old timidity seemed to come over him again as soon as they were alone. His fingers fumbled for hers, tentative, uncertain.

With tender contempt she felt him touch her so fearfully. And with pride she felt his hands grow bolder as they found her warm and willing.

She felt pride in the power of her flesh over

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his spirit. She felt almost as though she created him a man who had been but a gawky ineffectual before. Joy and confidence she knew she was giving him. Something submerged deep inside of him she dredged up like a half-drowned pup from a well and made it grow strong and dangerous against the warmth of her presence.

And the stronger and bolder he grew the weaker she became. As his arm tightened about her shoulders, dominating, demanding, she cuddled down beside him, little, cute and helpless, lifting weak hands to be overcome, gentle cooing protests to be smothered. Without effort or forethought, without conscious insincerity, she played her part to him—she was what he wanted her to be. . . .

“O Ruth!” his voice was hoarse with feeling. “I oughtn’t to do this. . . . You’re so good and perfect. . . . I oughtn’t to touch you. I can’t tell you how I feel . . . as though I were tearing a flower to pieces. . . . And yet I must. I need you, Ruth!”

His words thrilled her with triumph and

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yet made her uncomfortable too. They made her feel the precarious burden of the myth she was to him—the ancient myth of woman, who may be anything but herself.

He didn't know how to talk, she thought, or make love. He just blurted out his feelings as though he couldn't help it.

With awkward, trembling hands he rumpled her hair and her dress. He was making an awful mess of her. But it didn't matter. She had her vanity case. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to be overwhelmed.

His lips found hers and held them and for a long time they were still. She thought no more for the moment, but merely was, giving herself up wholly in a kiss, slipping perilously from her pose. . . .

But suddenly he released her and began to talk.

"Ruth. . . . You know what? . . . I wish I could run away with you right now and marry you. . . . Now! . . . To-night! I feel as though if I could have you now, nothing

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else would ever matter and no other time could possibly be as good as this!"

A moment before she had been almost one with him, forgetting herself. Now while her body was still in his arms her mind leapt back, separate, alert and calculating. He had saved her from a weakening moment. Cunning was in her words but not in her tone.

"How could we, Wilbur? I never heard of such a thing. . . ."

"Why couldn't we?" He came back at her earnestly. "There must be some little town we could drive to and find a minister or a justice of the peace and then catch a train for somewhere . . ."

"Oh, there are places enough we could go. When Eleanor Gates and Jim Hardy eloped they drove to Carbon and routed out a preacher and then caught the Limited to the Coast. . . . But are you sure you want to, Wilbur? We've known each other such a short time. . . . Are you sure it's best?"

Her heart was pounding. She could hardly keep her voice from trembling with

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excitement. And she wanted it to sound so hesitant and surprised. And they had already been out there so long and Alma would want to be going home pretty soon. They would have to be quick if they were going to do it.

"I was never so sure of anything in my life, Ruth! I want you and I want you now. . . . But are you sure, Ruth? Are you sure you know what you're doing—what it would mean?"

"Oh, I don't know, Wilbur. I feel now as though I could go anywhere with you and do anything. But wouldn't you rather wait . . . think about it awhile?"

"Wait? What's the use of waiting? No, I don't want to wait, as far as I'm concerned. I want to go ahead. I never wanted half so much to go ahead with anything—not even my work. . . . If only I could be sure we weren't hurting someone else, Ruth. . . . Your mother. . . . She's been so kind to me."

His voice was getting shaky with a confusion of emotions.

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"If there were only someone—some older person—we could tell. . . . Someone that could explain to her after we were gone so she wouldn't worry, so she would know we had thought of her. . . . I'll tell you, Ruth! Let's explain it to Miss Budlong. She's a good sort. . . ."

"I don't know, Wilbur. . . ."

Her voice was genuinely weak and dubious now. She was suddenly sick with indecision. What good reason, to him, for not telling Alma? And if Alma was a good sport about it, they would really go. And if they didn't tell Alma he and his conscience would spar for hours—until it was too late. But what would Alma say—Alma, her best friend? How little she knew of her, really! How little she trusted her now!

She trusted no one. She felt now the awful isolation of the will set on its way.

While she hesitated he seized the initiative.

"I'll go and find her!" He was opening the door. He was getting out. "I'll be back in a minute. . . ."

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With the aching tension of a gambler she saw him go. . . .

He was back in three minutes.

"Here she is! She was looking for us. [They wanted to go home. . . .]"

.Both of them climbed in and sat down, Wilbur between the two women.

Ruth could see Alma's eyes shining in the dim light. Alma smelled excitement.

"Now!" she said. "What is this terribly important matter you two want to ask me about?" Her teeth gleamed encouragement.

"We want to run away and get married. . . . Right now . . . to-night!" Wilbur spoke loud enough to reach a crowd. Trust him to blurt it out raw that way. "We want you to fix it up with Mrs. Bruck so that she won't feel bad about it. . . ."

Alma laughed as one would laugh at the prankish impossible project of a child.

"I never heard of such a thing," she said. "What in the world do you want to run away for? What are you running away from? If you really want to be married after you get

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over this moonstruck fit, nobody's going to stop you."

Ruth felt herself go limp in her seat. . . . It was all over, she knew. Alma would talk him out of it. And there wasn't a thing *she* could say—not a thing. That was the worst of it. She must be the modest, frightened, hesitating child. . . . She was in a fight with her hands tied.

"But you don't understand, Miss Budlong. We want to go *now!*" Wilbur's voice was more eloquent than his words. "I'm twenty-one. I've got the right. It's just a question of not hurting anyone's feelings. . . ."

"Just so," Alma agreed. She was serious and emphatic now. "And of course it *would* hurt Mrs. Bruck's feelings *terribly*. And I'm here in her place in a way. She wouldn't have let Ruth come without me. I have to answer to her for whatever happens. Surely you can see that I couldn't take the responsibility—that it wouldn't be fair to either of us. Think of your own mother, Mr. Fadden. . . . Would you have treated her that way?"

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They sat for a long moment in a silence heavy as doom. Wilbur broke it with a small voice, almost lost in defeat and disappointment.

"Maybe she's right, Ruth," he said feebly. "It wouldn't be fair to her or to your mother, either. . . . And we can get married another time. . . . I guess she's right. . . ."

"Yes, I suppose she is." Ruth pushed out the words with difficulty. They were weighted with bitterness and disgust.

Alma's teeth gleamed in triumph.

"Now come on back with me, you two moonstruck infants!" she gloated. "We'll have a few more dances and then go home. And you'll both thank me for saving you from such a prank."

No one thanked her as they straggled back in the dark. No one spoke. Alma led and Ruth walked behind her, staring at her back with hatred, digging nails into the palms of her hands. Wilbur, lagging a little, was silent until they got to the door. He touched her arm.

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"Never mind, Ruth . . ." he consoled tactlessly.

"Oh, I *don't* mind!" she assured him. Her voice skated precariously over a crack.

They entered and stood uneasily near the door just as music was starting, avoiding one another's eyes.

Ruth felt suddenly weary. She felt for the first time like running away.

But she had not long to think of her feelings. Conny Billop was coming across the floor with his eyes unmistakably on her. She had avoided him all evening but there was no escaping him now.

He was pretty drunk—about as drunk as anyone ever got at the Springs without being discreetly led away by friends. He was secure enough on his feet. His liquor showed chiefly in the swaggering assurance of his gait. Sober, Conny always had a touch of droop in his carriage and of apology in his voice. His endless conversation had a flavour of laboured self-justification. But drunk he bore himself like a conqueror, gave his stories to the world

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with a gesture of condescension, met doubt with fighting resentment.

He bore down upon her, grinning, held out his arms as though he were perfectly sure she desired nothing more than to dance with him. She would have liked to refuse him but she was afraid. . . . Over his shoulder as he bore her away she saw Wilbur and Alma dancing uncomfortably together. Wilbur's face was long and blank. It made her sick to see it.

Conny was talking, his lips almost at her ear.

"Say, Ruth, y'know . . . I've been looking at you all evening. . . . Couldn't keep my eyes off you. And I've been thinking all the time we were a couple of idiots when we had that scrap. . . ."

"Both of us?" The sarcasm leapt out of her mouth unintended but it did not touch Conny, wholly absorbed in his own mood and inspiration.

"Yeah. . . . Y'know, it just kind of came over me all at once. . . . We could have had a wonderful time and let the old town go to

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hell. What does it all amount to—this careful proper stuff? Live while you're alive—that's what I say. . . . You and I, Ruth, we're the same kind. We don't give a damn—that's us! We ought to stick together. . . ."

His words came tumbling out in a confusion of hot sincerity. They stirred in her nothing but bitter disgust.

Why was she so popular all of a sudden? Because Wilbur, the wealthy stranger, had taken her up. They all pretended to despise him and they all stood in awe of him because he had money. They all wanted her now because he did. They all wanted to take her away from him. They wanted to keep her in the place they had assigned her as the town scandal—something to talk about. They were all so nice, smiling, eager, and nothing would tickle them more than to see her lose him. In a bitter flash of intuition she felt that for the first time she saw through them all. Even Alma, her best friend—Alma had spoiled her best chance! All for her own

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good. . . . Oh, sure! All of them were full of noble feelings. How she despised them! And at the same time feared! . . .

All her life she had seen in her mind contrasting images of herself. As a little girl, when she got good grades and gold stars at Sunday school, when dad praised her, she saw herself as a bright angel of perfection. And when she was disgraced and punished she was haunted by a vision of herself all soiled and horrid. . . . Both those images, grown up, danced in her maddened fancy now. One of them was a white, vague, preposterous creature, like a paper and tinsel angel on a Christmas-tree, and that was herself as she looked to Wilbur. The other was a be-draggled thing, spattered with mud of gossip . . . herself as the town would have her . . . her reputation. . . . Her real self seemed to sit apart and terribly alone.

"We're gonna have a cocktail party out in a car, Ruth—a lot of the old high-school bunch—and we want you to come. . . . After this dance. . . . We'll all sneak out to Archie

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Platt's car. He's got a Hudson sedan. Will you, Ruth? It's gonna be a red-hot party!"

How to refuse without making him angry? . . . Because she was afraid of him.

"Thanks, Conny. I'd like to but I can't. I've got this next dance."

"Aw, cut it, Ruth! You never used to be such a good little girl. . . . This is going to be something special extra. . . . Honest! You don't want to miss it. . . . Ruth, you've got to come!"

"I can't, Conny. . . ."

The worst of it was she didn't have the next dance because she had been out so long. Unless someone came to her rescue it would be hard to get away. . . . She saw Romer at the door, smoking a cigarette as he leaned against the lintel, watching the dancers. She caught his eye easily as they passed him, winked and jerked her head ever so slightly toward Conny. Romer nodded and threw away his cigarette. When the music stopped he came up and claimed her.

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"This is the one you promised me, Ruth."

"Yes . . . I know it is."

She smiled at Conny and they walked away. She couldn't resist the temptation to look back once. Conny was still standing there, looking after them, and she could see the slow muddled resentment of a tipsy man dawning in his face.

"Conny was lit and a little impossible," she told Romer. "Thanks for coming. . . ."

They danced in silence and she relaxed and drifted limp in his arms, grateful to him for saying nothing, infinitely relieved to be for a moment with someone she had neither to fight nor to fool. When the music was over they mingled and lost each other in a group on the floor.

Her mind went instantly back to Wilbur. She searched the floor for him with an anxious eye, again and again, made sure he wasn't there. . . .

Neither was Conny nor Walt Gibby nor Archie Platt nor Eva. . . . Could they have roped him into their party? He was so easily

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led and he didn't know how to say no when he wanted to. . . . And she knew he would want to escape her for a while because he was ashamed. . . .

The dance was going briskly now. There were more men than women on the floor, because some couples had gone home, but all the stags had stayed and most of them were dancing with the energetic abandon that comes after the third drink. They had begun to break and she was as much in demand as any girl on the floor for she was one of the nimblest. She smiled and laughed and deftly adjusted her step to ever-changing partners. And all the time her eye was on the door. Every minute that passed without a sight of Wilbur heightened the tension of her anxiety.

When finally she did see him enter she freed herself with a ruthless "Excuse me," made her way across the floor, dodging dancers, with some slight pretence of accident brought up before him. . . .

His face was as easy to read as a child's. He had no gift of pretence. And his face

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now was a mirror of misery and disaster. It was pale and his mouth worked a little. There was a cut on his lip which bled slightly and he wiped the blood furtively with his tongue. His eyes were all confusion and distress and he seemed to look at nothing—or at least at nothing real.

A sickening sense of evil pitted against her she felt when she drew near him—as though something evil had hunted him out there in the dark and gotten into him. . . . For a moment she felt, almost as a tangible presence, the black beast of malice that crawls wherever love is denied.

“Hello!” she called, trying unsuccessfully to sound casual and happy. “This is ours. Let’s dance.”

When he touched her she knew he was lost. All the tension of eagerness was gone out of his body. His hand and arm were limp. . . .

“Where have you been? And what’s the matter?” she demanded. “You look at me so funny. . . . Please don’t look at me that way! . . .”

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He was silent for a moment, and then:

"O Ruth! . . . I don't know how to tell you. Something has happened that's changed everything—everything we said and planned this evening. I don't feel about you the way I did. . . . I want to but I can't. . . . I've got to get away by myself and think. . . ."

He was floundering miserably in his confession when Archie Platt cut in on them and took her away. He released her with evident relief. Over her partner's shoulder she saw him make for the door—he almost ran for it—and disappear. . . .

She danced furiously and how long she didn't know. She danced with man after man hardly knowing who her partners were. She didn't know what else to do and dancing was a slight anodyne for the sick disgust she felt.

The first thing she noticed was Alma signalling to her desperately, with a funny, worried, half-pitying look on her face. As soon as she could get free she went to where Alma was sitting alone. Alma took her hand.

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"Listen, dear," she said gently. "Mr. Fadden asked me to tell you that he wasn't feeling well, and went home. He took a taxi, I think. He was awfully sorry and confused. . . . Said something about having to start for the mountains early in the morning. It seems rude but I don't think he meant it to be. He seemed to be in an awful state and you know how bashful he is. He simply didn't want you or anyone else to see him that way. . . . I think some of the boys gave him a drink that made him sick and Doc said he heard he and Conny Billop had a fight. . . . What about I'm sure I don't know. . . . Anyway, the party was evidently a little too much for him. . . . But everything will be all right, I'm sure, and now we'll all go home. . . ."

Ruth jerked away her hand. She was suddenly filled with a rage that felt like hot water poured all through her, bursting out against her eyelids in scalding tears. . . .

"*I'm* not!" She snapped out her reply and

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turned away. Alma came running after her. . . .

"You must, Ruth. . . . Your mother'll be worried. And I'm responsible. . . ."

She turned, flaming red.

"Nobody's responsible for me! I'm tired of being taken care of. . . . You can tell mother I won't come! From this minute on I'm going to do just what I please, just what I feel like. . . ."

Alma seemed for a moment dumb with amazement. She had never shown Alma her temper before.

People were looking at them curiously. She took advantage of Alma's consternation to flee. Out the door she went, into the dark away from the cars. When she felt completely alone she covered her face with her hands and sobbed. Her thoughts moved to the bitter spasmodic rhythm of her angry grief.

What a fool she had been! To imagine she could get away with anything—in this town—

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among her friends! . . . It was all over. That was clear enough. . . .

She didn't speculate much on what had happened because she could imagine it so easily. . . . Wilbur in a group of them, in the dark, talking about her. . . . Eva dropping gentle poisonous words in his ear. . . . Conny getting him alone, giving him a tip for his own good. . . . Evidently he had resented something Conny said. But all of it had been too much for him. . . . She knew just how it had hit him. It had simply smashed the impression she had worked so hard to make. . . .

All of them or any of them might have done it. It didn't matter. He was such a baby—a big overgrown mamma's boy that thought all girls were angels . . . or else devils. . . . It was just as well it had happened to-night. Because if it hadn't it would have happened some other time. She would never have gotten away with it—not in her home town!

All her bold dreams of the morning seemed to her preposterous now. It made her sick

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and ashamed to think of them—to think she had been fool enough to believe in them.

She could dream bravely but she never could believe in her dreams. She could never believe for long that anything sweet and wonderful really could happen to *her*. . . .

And yet—she remembered with a pang—she had come somewhere near it once. . . . When they had talked about running away. But he didn't have the nerve. He would never have done it. Even if Alma hadn't interfered. And his family would have objected . . . and . . . all kinds of things. . . . But who cared? She was well rid of him.

That was the burden of her plea to herself. Passionately she yearned to convince herself that she wholly despised him now.

When she had done crying she felt suddenly cool and hard and reckless. She wanted to go back to the dance and show everybody she didn't care. She craved now some mighty self-assertion. She yearned to fling herself against the forces that bound her destiny,

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break through them somewhere, escape somehow the tension of futile misery that possessed her.

She slipped cautiously into the hall and made for the dressing-room. It was empty save for limp-hanging wraps on an unpainted board wall and a mulatto maid asleep in a corner. She bathed her eyes and face in cold water and then before a small square mirror made up her face with care and skill but with a lavish hand for colour. She was pale and she covered her pallor with rouge—more than ever she had used before. Her mouth she lip-sticked with a reckless art, skilfully emphasizing it. Deliberately, experimentally, she smiled into the mirror her most provocative smile. It was a soft, bow-curving smile, full of the secret wisdom of women—of a secret promise and a secret scorn.

CHAPTER EIGHT



OMER left the hall, crossed a thin trickle of creek on stones and climbed the mountain side precariously in the dark, moved by an impulse to get away from and above the hot bright seething patch of life in which he had moved for hours.

The quality of it had gotten disturbingly into him. He was hot and confused with alcohol in his blood and the crash and scream of jazz still ringing in his ears. . . . After a hard scramble he sat down on a flat rock several hundred feet above the road and lit a cigarette.

The Pavilion was a bit of yellow light, a faint tinkle of music and a spatter of clapping hands far below. As he turned and looked down upon it he was amazed how small and fragile a thing it seemed under the sky, beside the shouldering mountain. It seemed

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frivolous, brave and absurd—this little group of humans who shut out and ignored the immensity and darkness of the universe, created a bright little cosmos of their own where they revelled, fought and loved as though they had been eternal and the stars no more than candles for their feast.

Sitting high on a mountain he recovered something of his serene egotistical separateness, fell back into his congenial mood of meditation.

Living, he reflected now, was a hot and humiliating business. It had a way of dragging down everything it touched to its average earthy level. He approached life clad in the bright garments of his ideal and aspiration and he fell forthwith into mud-holes of passion and greed, emerging no cleaner or more dignified than anyone else but a good deal more conscious than most of his dirt and absurdity. In solitude and meditation he would clean and shrive himself only to do it all over again, impelled by an insatiable desire to know

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life and by a love of it that throve on snubs.

For him there was neither a secure and dignified seat apart nor a comfortable place in the crowds. . . . Living was hard on the vanity of man. But to watch life and reflect upon it—that was to sit among gods.

The trouble with this rôle of serene observer lay in the fact that it was hard if not impossible to maintain. It was like walking the top of a high board fence in a strong and shifting wind. At best you had a hurried choice as to which way you would fall and sometimes you might make a spectator think you had jumped. . . .

He had been trying to persuade himself all evening that he was staying at the dance to watch and relish it as human comedy. Gradually he had been forced to admit that he was one of the chief clowns—as a man in love is always something of a clown.

To be sure, he was not very desperately in love. He never was. He knew he could walk away from this emotion just as he had

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walked away from so many others but that did not make it any less real while he sat beside it.

Wherever he went he fell in love and always with a woman who somehow embodied for him the qualities of time and place. What he craved was intimacy not with individuals but with life. And by possessing a woman he came somewhere near intimacy with the life of which she was a part. He penetrated swiftly into the vitals of it. Love was a key that opened doors and showed glimpses—absurd, terrible and sometimes lovely. . . .

Ella, he could see now, had been to him no more than a specimen of youth bewildered and excited by war. She had gone her way as he was going his. They had only touched each other in passing.

So it had been before. Neither catastrophe nor happiness had come out of any human contact he had known. Most people moved in currents of life that carried them on and away from him. . . .

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Ruth was a perfect embodiment of the town. She had its blind energy, its unawareness, its painful conflict of impulse and ideal. . . .

That was why she dominated his imagination, he told himself, trying desperately to climb on to the high horse of his thought. But he could not reduce her to an abstraction, could not subdue her image to the discipline of his mind. Her mouth mocked him out of the darkness. He remembered the way she swung her hips when she walked, the smell of her hair, the hard sweetness of her body, the impression she always made of being more completely and intensely alive than any about her. Hopeless to try to make desire anything but what it was—blind craving of the flesh that turned away from all light and integrity, wanted black hot darkness and dissolution.

He wanted the girl and he couldn't get her. . . . Admit it and go home to a lonely bed. He rose impatiently and threw away his cigarette. He would go and have one more look at the crowd just to prove to him-

Hot Saturday

self that he *could* look and go away comparatively untroubled.

The dance was nearing a lively finish. Out of respect for the churches the music was supposed to stop at midnight on Saturday but someone had evidently oiled the orchestra to run an extra hour for it was past midnight now.

More than half the crowd had gone home, but the few that remained were all dancing with abandon. No one was drunk but most of the men and a few of the women showed the nimble feet and foolish happy faces that come of music mixed with a few drinks.

At first he thought they were all gone—Ruth and her followers—but he presently discovered that she alone was still there. She was dancing with a man he didn't know. As they passed he met her eyes and knew they contained a signal for him. . . .

Breaking was in order now. He took her away from her partner and they danced to the tune that had run like a theme through the evening. It was the orchestra's favourite

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piece and they played it with ardour, rocking in their chairs. The little fellow who played the saxophone rose and went among the dancers, jigging fantastically, his face ballooning red with effort. The boy who took up dance tickets had abandoned his task to do a cheek-to-cheek with the hat-check girl. Harry Gardini, the dauntless leader of the Lightning Harmonizers, clawed the piano in high sweeping strokes like a fighting tomcat. Rolling in his seat, tossing his heavy black mop of hair, sweating profusely through his pink silk shirt, he seemed the very genius of jazz. In his harsh and powerful tenor he sang the chorus. . . .

“. . . Sometimes I really think you're a demon,
Hear me screamin',
When I look in your eyes I can see you
steamin'. . . .”

. . . He had never known he could dance so well. He had never danced so well before. He felt as though the music moved him. . . . Harry Gardini's voice had him by the legs. . . .

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They fitted together like gear and clutch from his nose buried and tickled in the fragrant rumple of her hair to his knee playing in and out between her caressive possessive thighs.

She came to meet him with everything but her feet and they eluded his with a wonderful telepathy. She knew what he was going to do and that was more than he knew. He chased her and she ran and he never caught her and she never escaped and they could have gone on forever. . . . Wham! . . . The music stopped.

He was suddenly aware again of everybody else—sweating men clapping hands in clamorous demand for more and rosy girls waiting eager. . . . It started again and it stopped again and again they hammered for more. Clapping hands said, Please don't stop for now we have got it—what we came for. We have got the moment we groped for all evening. . . . Let it not end!

Harry Gardini, hoarse and perspiring, artist triumphant, turned again to his piano, rocked and pounded and sang, gave up finally,

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exhausted, grinning, bowing, tossing his black mop and leering at them through it . . . turned and closed the piano.

Ruth and Romer looked at each other and smiled as two who know something that needs no saying.

"Come on," she said, and they went out to her car, he holding her arm as though to help her walk, but really carried by her flesh wherever it chose to lead, going docile silent and hopeful beside her.

"You're not alone, are you?" he inquired.

"Yes . . . hop in . . . I'll take you to town."

He was a bit bewildered by her manner.

It did not seem to invite any approach just then. She was busy pulling on her gauntlets and starting her car, saying nothing. She had the air of one preoccupied by a purpose. Whether it included or ignored him he could not be sure. Certainly she had picked him up as suddenly and decisively as she had set him down a few weeks before. The initiative was hers as it had always been. He felt

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that he was being carried along by another's will. But he was used to that feeling where women were concerned. He had learned long since that he was no match for them in action. Moved by impulse and instinct they were swift and sure where he plodded and floundered among the trash of his endless thinking.

Across the level prairie she flew, passing other cars with a reckless foot on the gas. She made a rapid and skilful detour which took her into town by a side road. In less than half an hour they brought up before his door on a street deserted save for shadowy prowling cats and a solitary drunk who found the whole width of it too small for his glorious but errant locomotion.

They looked at each other and she laughed at his evident puzzlement.

"Won't you come in?" he invited politely, not to be outdone in reserve.

She nodded.

"Yeah. . . . But I think I'll park the car."

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around the corner. . . . Safety first. . . . You go on up and I'll join you."

He let himself into his two-room flat at the head of a short flight of steps, sat down in darkness faintly relieved by beams of an arc light shining through the window, and lit a cigarette. He observed with a sort of detached interest that his hand trembled. But his consciousness was mostly in his ears, listening for a step on the stairs. . . . He had almost given up hope when he heard it.

She came with quick soft tread, two steps at a time. He went to meet her fumbling for her in the dark.

"Shall I make a light?" he asked.

She laughed.

"No, not now. . . . I may be old-fashioned but I would rather undress in the dark."

Her words were casual and facetious, as she had always been toward him. But her voice did not match her words. . . . Her voice was high and tremulous with excitement.

CHAPTER NINE



ATE Sunday morning, almost noon, she came downstairs and sat on the porch.

Just before dawn she had eased the car into the garage without waking the family and entered the house like a burglar with her shoes in her hand.

She had slept the heavy untroubled sleep of a body wholly wearied and wholly satisfied. Despite a cold bath and a cup of coffee she was not fully awake now.

She was glad the family had gone to church and that the house was still and empty. That was about all she felt. She had fallen suddenly from strong emotion into oblivion, like a soldier after battle, and from that nether world of dream and dark she was only half emerged. . . .

Sunday was hush and sunshine and twitter

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of birds and church bells solemnly, lazily melodious, like sweet inane voices repeating old outworn thoughts, soothingly meaningless.

It was a morning strangely new, clean and clear, washed by the storm of yesterday, unmarred by dust or noise.

A few people passed, coming home from church, bored and sleepy, thinking of fried chicken and naps in hammocks. She saw them clearly but without interest, lazily noting detail as one will when the mind is vacant and at rest. She observed how nearly everyone looked uncomfortable on Sunday morning—fat women in shoes that hurt, thinking about dinner, men who had cut themselves shaving, nervous and sleepy after the night out, dressed-up little children, too conscious of their clothes to play, grasping Sunday-school cards in their hands, walking properly beside their elders.

She alone was not uncomfortable. She was in a mood of mindless healthy unconcern.

She saw a man coming down the sidewalk

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hurriedly. At a distance he looked vaguely familiar but he caught her eye chiefly because his quick nervous movement seemed alien to the somnolent quality of Sunday morning. Not until he was within a hundred feet of the house did she recognize him with dull amazement as Wilbur Fadden.

For he seemed to have changed greatly overnight. His face was pale and haggard and drawn in a way that made him look older than ever before when she had seen him. His mouth especially was set and tense, dragged out of its childish softness, making lines in his face.

He saw her and came straight toward her. Unsmiling and resolute he mounted the steps, holding out his hand. She took it automatically, open-mouthed. . . .

He seemed to come to her out of a remote past. So much had happened since that last dance of theirs together when he had thrown her down. So many emotions and sensations had rolled across her consciousness that his impression on it had worn dim. The pale

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memory of his timid kisses had been blotted out in dark red. . . . She felt herself a different person now and he looked a different one. He sat down beside her in the porch swing, holding on to her hand with a grip of nervous tension that almost hurt.

"O Ruth! Can you forgive me for the way I acted last night? I don't know how to tell you—I kind of lost my head. I think I lived more yesterday than in any year of my life before and I got all mixed up about everything. . . . When I left you I couldn't sleep. I didn't even go to bed. I walked around all night thinking things out. . . . Ruth, I need you! And I don't believe a word anyone says about you. . . . Ruth, I know you're good!"

A NOTE ON THE TYPE IN
WHICH THIS BOOK IS SET

The type in which this book has been set (on the Linotype) is based on the design of Caslon. It is generally conceded that William Caslon (1692-1766) brought the old-style letter to its highest perfection and while certain modifications have been introduced to meet changing printing conditions, the basic design of the Caslon letters has never been improved. The type selected for this book is a modern adaptation rather than an exact copy of the original Caslon. The principal difference to be noted is a slight shortening of the ascending and descending letters to accommodate a larger face on a given body-size.



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